

I SAID TO MY WIFE



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JEAN DUCHE

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Translated by

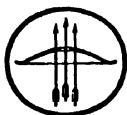
VIRGINIA GRAHAM

—

Nicolas Bentley drew the pictures

1438

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CHAPTER ONE

I Said to my Wife

I WAS very happy the day I met Juliette – I was a bachelor. The odd thing about bachelors is that they seem to be totally unaware of their good fortune. They just take it for granted. I suppose a pessimist would say that this applies to everybody, but I don't claim to be able to speak for all mankind. All I say is that since I have been married to Juliette I, for one, have become quite painfully aware of the joys of celibacy.

They can't be questioned, even by Juliette with her passion for argument. And yet the fact remains that bachelors do not organize themselves to protect and defend the blessings of the single state, as they would surely do if they appreciated them. On the contrary – what do we see every day? Nothing but bachelors getting married.

She came into my life through the door of the Montana. The Montana is an existentialist bar next to the Café de Flore. At that time it was not yet cluttered up with young men in plaid shirts and black trousers nor, for that matter, with young women in plaid trousers and black shirts. It was still a peaceful corridor lined with bottles, sheltering people like me and Jean-Paul Sartre, who didn't look in the least bit existentialist.

As a matter of fact I was, that very evening, engaged in interviewing this intelligent philosopher on the subject of his unintelligible philosophy. I was a journalist in those days.

'Existentialism,' said Sartre, 'what is that?'

'I'm asking you,' I replied courteously.

'It's a fad,' said Sartre. 'I am a fad.'

'Forgive me,' I said, 'but existentially you are nothing at all. So you can't *be* a fad. You *exist* a fad.'

'That's right,' said Sartre, downing a pastis. He sat considering the bottom of his glass. Respectfully I waited for further pronouncements.

'Well,' he said at last, 'there's another pastis which isn't any more.' *

We ordered two more.

'And yet it still exists,' he continued reflectively, 'in my stomach. It might have had a totally different existence in yours. Take . . .'

'Take another drink,' I intervened hastily.

I thought our interview needed oiling.

The barman, a cultured man who was showing an intelligent interest in our conversation, hurried to bring two more glasses, so that there were now four before us. Meanwhile Jean-Paul Sartre had recaptured the thread of his thoughts.

' . . . another pastis,' he said.

The barman seemed a little astonished but as he greatly admired the philosopher he obediently uncorked a bottle. I stopped him with a gesture. I mean enough is enough.

'Who dares foretell,' murmured Sartre, 'the future of *this* pastis?'

Its destiny became apparent almost immediately. It was knocked over by a young woman hitching herself on to the neighbouring stool. Instead of apologizing she burst out laughing.

'So much for the future of anything!' said the barman, converted to existentialism, as he mopped up the mess. Three glasses remained. We offered one to the attractive stranger. God, but how sweetly she laughed! She was called Juliette and I didn't realize until much later that I myself had, to all intents and purposes, stopped laughing for ever.

All this happened on the twelfth of December a little more than two years ago. On the fifteenth of December she told me she loved me, which seemed quite natural.

I see no reason why I should not admit that I'm not bad-looking. At any rate I wasn't. Nowadays I really don't know. Being modest by nature I have to be told I'm good-looking before I believe it, and nowadays, alas, nobody tells me any such thing – except Juliette, of course, but then she's prejudiced. 'How beautiful you are,' she whispers when she's in a tender mood. She also describes me as a monster when she's angry. In the old days women used quite simply to tell me how handsome I was, generally adding that they adored me, and I answered that I thought they too were adorable. In forty-eight hours I was the man of their lives and it lasted a week at least, sometimes more. This is why I wasn't particularly surprised when Juliette told me she loved me. It was what followed that was so surprising.

We had returned to sit on the Montana's little stools at that hour when the lions come down to drink. I allude to that brief uncertain hour at dusk when men, (heaving from their shoulders the weight of their daily labours, run with thirsting hearts to meet well-dressed women under electric lights. A divine hour on the threshold of a virgin night when everything begins afresh for men – for men, that is, who are not married.

So there we were, back again on the Montana's stools.

'Do you know, I think I'm going to fall in love with you,' said Juliette suddenly.

'Well, that's quite a coincidence,' I said, 'because I adore you. And,' I added, with what I have been told is a fetching leer, 'I know of a perfect little place where we could be very happy together.'

She smiled rather sadly, put her hand on mine and fiddled tenderly with my thumb.

'You've got it wrong,' she said.

I gave her a sort of squinting sidelong look. She didn't seem to be joking. And yet her eyes were smiling though her face was grave. A strange ebullition, rather like hot steam, rose to my head, and I smiled too; foolishly, oh so foolishly! Almost imperceptibly a shiver of pleasure ran through her and she made no attempt to conceal it. You love me, it said, you are just beginning to realize it, I know it and I want you to know that I know it.

'I feel like a rat in a trap,' I said bitterly.

'Me too,' she cheerfully replied.

And then we really looked each other in the face and we burst into great yells of laughter, enough to last us the rest of our lives. As though we had plenty to spare!

* * *

Novelists, who are wonderful psychologists, have often compared love to an illness. Sometimes it's the measles, sometimes the mumps. These comparisons always seem to me to be wide of the mark because everyone knows that in certain acute forms of love the incubating period lasts no longer than a shiver. Other novelists prefer to draw a parallel with mental diseases (deliriums, hallucinations etc). I have read their books with interest and I've sometimes thought I recognized symptoms of my own. But who could be bothered with the disagreeable remedies these people suggest: cold douches, electric shocks, strait jackets and so on? I imagine one would have to have loved a great deal to deserve such treatment. And anyway, I always suspect people who write gloomily about love of knowing more about the theory than the practice. And that, without undue boasting, isn't my trouble at all.

No, I established fairly rapidly that our love had nothing in common with ordinary illnesses. It was a special sort of dementia, not unlike rabies. I had been bitten.

I did make an effort to withstand the assault. For instance, when I kissed her for the first time she said: 'That would have been absolutely divine if your mouth didn't taste of tobacco.' I took it for a charming example of her humour.

But one evening when I was being particularly passionate on a Métro platform she said coldly:

'If you don't stop smoking I shall be forced to believe you don't love me.'

'But I do!' I cried. 'Only I love smoking too. Not as much,' I hastily continued, 'of course not nearly as much as I love you.'

'Be careful what you're saying,' she snapped. 'Are you daring to weigh me against a cigarette?'

'You be careful too!' I barked. 'Answer me yes or no, are we going to love one another for the rest of our lives?'

'I doubt it,' she said.

'So do I,' I said. 'It might be for fifty years!'

'I couldn't stand it.'

'Fifty years,' I said, 'represents something like twenty thousand days together.'

'How appalling!' she said, looking genuinely startled.

'Twenty cigarettes a day for twenty thousand days – that means you're asking me to weigh four hundred thousand cigarettes against one woman.'

'Beast!' she said.

'All the same I love you,' I said. 'Do you want me to give up four hundred thousand moments of exquisite pleasure – just for you?'

'Yes,' she said.

'Well,' I told her, 'you definitely can't count on it.'

She turned on her heel and walked away with dignity. I was on the point of calling her back, as she expected me to do; indeed, if the train hadn't arrived at that moment I would have given up smoking. As it was, I let her get into it.

The next day she appeared with six packets of Players.

'If you have to smoke,' she said smiling, 'at least smoke cigarettes which smell good.'

I must have told her once how I regretted the days when one could get English tobacco, and she'd remembered. . . . My heart began to melt like a cheese.

'You silly sap,' I told her.

'No . . . , please!' she said gaily, 'don't thank me.'

Since that day I've taken to carrying coffee beans about in my pocket. I always chew one before I kiss a woman – I mean my wife.

But if I'd known she had her own private bad habit – of throwing my money down every available drain – I might not have been so amenable.

* * *

In the past I had enjoyed nothing so much as those free evenings when I sauntered along the pavements distributing haphazard smiles to pretty girls, or simply wool-gathering, my mind afloat on those Parisian clouds which, as they dipped into the Seine, looked as soft as the breasts of doves. Now, of course, I met Juliette every evening and any mention of such a subject would have been received by her – and by me – as an insult.

At noon my work on the paper only gave me time enough to eat a sandwich, but soon even these few moments of freedom seemed, without her, to stretch before me like a desert. So she came out and shared the sandwich with me, and her renunciation of her lunch filled me with an indefinable elation.

The heart is certainly a most illogical organ. Juliette would take my arm in the street, leaning on it with all the weight of her love, and this used to irritate me prodigiously. And then, one evening, when I was walking alone, practising the

bachelor's gay elastic step, I had a feeling there was something wrong – more than wrong – abnormal. I blush to think of it even now: I was missing that dead weight clamped to my side.

I arrived at our rendezvous, with this confession heavy on my lips. She wasn't there. I didn't worry because I could fill the time by thinking of her. Twenty minutes passed in this agreeable preoccupation. Another ten minutes – and I was absolutely convinced she'd stopped loving me as suddenly as she'd started.

Every time the door opened I pricked my ears and goggled my eyes, and every time it wasn't her. It was Errol Flynn and Annabel, or Laurence Olivier, or Claude Mauriac, or Pagliero, but not Juliette. They eyed me and my little table with profound pity. And then it was Tamara, who happens to be a tramp as well as a Circassian dancer.

'Hullo!' she cried gaily. 'You look awful. You ought to be in bed.'

'Yes,' I answered, 'alone.'

'Don't be vulgar,' said Tamara, adding hopefully: 'I adore men who suffer.'

'If you have a grain of friendship for me, Tamara, you'll go. I don't want her to see you.'

'Is she jealous?' asked Tamara.

'I hope so. It's still the best way of being certain you're loved.'

'And you?' asked Tamara. 'Are you jealous?'

'Me?' I replied. 'Are you trying to be funny?'

Tamara sighed. 'A Russian woman,' she said, 'is never funny. She's just passionate. Listen . . .'

She sat down in Juliette's chair.

'I won't listen,' I said, 'and you're going.'

'Do you know what you look like?' she continued obstinately. 'You look like someone with an appalling stomach ache – someone with some serious intestinal trouble.'

The door opened, again on someone unimportant (they were in their thousands that evening).

'If you leave straight away,' I answered, 'I promise to call you when my suffering becomes unbearable.'

'You promise?' said Tamara getting up. 'You poor sick dove. You miserable little worm.'

Three quarters of an hour later I was still thinking of Juliette, but now in disagreeable terms. Then she walked in, looking fresh as a daisy, ordered a cocktail as she passed the bar and observed, just as gaily as Tamara:

'You look awful.'

'Why are you late?' I asked in the voice of a sergeant admonishing a young recruit for being out after curfew.

'Why, darling? Because I was too early of course.'

This answer deserved a derisive laugh. I laughed derisively.

'But it's true, darling! I couldn't bear to think of you waiting. I know all about those mad ideas which whizz through one's head when one's waiting for someone one loves. And you still love me, don't you . . . ?'

She cleverly didn't wait for the reply.

' . . . And so I decided this evening I'd be punctual. But as I can't be punctual I was early. I started to wait for you, and I began to worry. Suddenly, d'you know what happened? I saw you, darling, mooning along all alone, without me to take your arm . . . and then I saw you'd been run over by a car and then I was certain it was a bus.'

'But as you were early I wasn't late!' I remonstrated.

'Oh darling! Can't you understand how appalling it is to wait for someone you love?'

I judged it useless to tell her I'd just come to understand that very thing.

'So I went and did some shopping, and here I am. And here you are . . . it's marvellous.'

'I have been here,' I told her, 'for three-quarters of an hour.'

'You're joking,' she said.

'I haven't the heart to joke. It's a quarter to eight.'

'One can joke at a quarter to eight,' she said. But, as she saw I didn't appreciate her humour: 'It's extraordinary,' she sighed. 'I left at ten minutes to seven and it only takes five minutes. So it can't be a quarter to eight. It's not logical. I know I met Christian who wanted me to have a drink with him, but all the same!'

She laughed merrily.

'I'm not laughing,' I said.

'Why not?' she asked. 'It's funny. He came with me, here, right to the door, and d'you know what he did? He put his arm round my waist.'

'That's screamingly funny,' I said.

'And he kissed me before I could do a thing!'

'Side-splitting.'

'And can you guess what he said?'

'No,' I yelled, 'I can't guess, I don't want to guess!'

'He said: "You're much too gorgeous for that footling little journalist." Ha! Ha!'

Really, Juliette's laugh!

'He was talking about you, darling,' she added somewhat unnecessarily.

'Excruciatingly funny,' I said to her, 'I'm sick with laughter.'

'Of course, the poor thing's jealous. One can't be too cross with him. But what a face! Are you jealous too?'

'Good Lord, no, I'm not jealous,' I asserted with vigour. 'For one thing jealousy is a vile, dishonourable . . .'

I interrupted myself abruptly: what had I been saying a short while ago to Tamara? But I hadn't time to linger over details, so I continued:

'I don't think your parents look after you properly. This course in English you're supposed to be taking is a lot of nonsense. If you'd told me you'd come to Paris to study be-bop and the boogie-woogie it would be much more credible, what with all those young boys hopping round you all the time.'

'You're not jealous?' she said.

'No, I'm not.'

'Don't shout,' she said.

'But still I'm curious to know how far you intend to go in your studies with these boys.'

She looked at me without answering and I felt a fool.

'I don't blame you,' she said softly. 'Let's have dinner.'

I knew she thought her be-bop boys unimportant, of no consequence whatever. She looked to me for more solid results, but what these were I didn't choose to consider. So I continued in my role of the gay seducer. However, it turned out that just about the moment our *sole meunière* was cooked, so was I. I lost my head completely.

'About food,' I said. 'We've got magnificent ideas about luncheon and dinner, but I can't help thinking it would be lovely to have breakfast together.'

I really am a fool sometimes!

I saw her hand moving across to mine and I remembered the time she'd fiddled with my thumb – that time when I'd 'got it wrong'.

'Don't you think,' she smiled, 'that that involves all sorts of things?'

'Well, what?' I asked. 'Are we going to sit looking at each other over the tops of café tables for fifty years?'

Her hand gripped mine and she said, very seriously:

'I hope not.'

'So?' I asked her.

'So,' she said, 'it's about time you realized that you want to marry me.'

'Don't be silly,' I answered, 'I'm not a marrying man.'

It came out, bang, just like that. As you see, I don't pull my punches. All the same, considering things retrospectively in this third year of my marriage, I admit I must have followed it up with a moment of weakness. But which moment exactly? I didn't notice a thing till the day of the ceremony.

* * *

On that day, a lovely day at the end of March, I made a last heroic attempt to get free, threshing the waters as effectively as a fish hooked on an anchor.

Her parents had arrived from Casablanca where her father was an architect, and for a week they had been busying themselves with the reception and in particular with the friends I refused to invite to it. This led to my first clinch with her mother, because she was determined to invite all the cousins and cousins of cousins, and I, though I was prepared to look ridiculous, wanted to look it in private. Mercifully Juliette hadn't a young girl's usual complex about orange blossom and she sympathized with my terrors. Without her support I would never have won my point, sound though it was.

That morning, I had barely got used to my coat tails flapping against my calves when I presented myself at the Plaza Athénée which had taken the place of the parental roof. For the occasion Juliette had abandoned her room in the Latin Quarter and had come to stay with her parents.

In passing I gave a quick look at the rooms which had been set aside for the reception, and had a talk with the head waiter.

'I'll give you a large tip,' I told him, 'if you see that everyone's gone in three hours. And if,' I said, 'in order to clear the ground you need someone who can kick accurately, just let me know.'

The head waiter nodded sympathetically.

'You'll get through it all right, monsieur,' he said. 'If you'll allow me to say so, your young lady is charming; and you only marry once . . . at least that's what all of us here are hoping.'

'It's the once I'm so worried about,' I muttered.

But he didn't understand.

I had decided early on that the whole operation should take place in a day. This entailed another battle with Madame Capoulet, who raised objections on the lines that all nice girls went through the civil ceremony the day before the religious; or even the day before the day before. No well brought up girl, she asserted, had ever been seen wearing white at a Town Hall. But once again Juliette was perfect and we won the battle: the Town Hall at 11.0, church at noon, luncheon at 1.0 and my wife all to myself at 3.0 . . . if she *was* my wife. It was this latter point which seemed to demand urgent discussion before we went to the Town Hall.

The lift man pulled the gates across behind me. I knocked on her door. For once she wasn't late. The moment I saw her in her white satin dress, bewitchingly outlined – architecturally she leaves nothing to be desired – I thought perhaps the head waiter had been right and I was probably an ass.

I carefully shut the door of her room while I reassembled my arguments.

'Juliette,' I said, 'I must leave you.'

'Already?' she said. 'We've got a good half hour before we're expected at the Town Hall.'

She had spoken in a soft, sweet little voice, too soft, too sweet, too little. She knew quite well I was contemplating a more definite departure. Only, quite simply, she thought I was crazy.

'Juliette,' I continued, 'I love you too much to marry you.'

'Sit down then,' she said in soothing tones, 'and tell me all about it.'

'I haven't closed an eye all night thinking of you.'

'That's sweet of you,' she said, 'but you ought to have taken a pill.'

'Don't tease me, Juliette. Can't you see I'm desperately unhappy?'

I sniffed.

'Can't you see that marriage kills love?'

'If you sniff again,' she said, 'I shall believe it.'

I sniffed on the off chance, but without success. I felt a gentle hand stroking the nape of my neck. This gave me the strength to try and appeal to her emotional side.

'You are too beautiful,' I stammered, 'too fine, too sensitive, too passionate, too alive! I'll never be able to keep you. I feel it, I'm certain of it . . . since it would kill me to lose you I prefer not to have you; in fact I insist on not having you.'

The gentle hand had left my neck.

'Well, you can have this, anyway,' said Juliette.

As an upper cut it wasn't at all bad – nor, for that matter, as a proof of love.

'You're quite right,' she yelled, 'I'm beautiful, sensitive, fine . . .'

' . . . And passionate,' I interpolated, clutching my face.

'And you . . .' She sought desperately for a suitable epithet. 'You're just a wet soggy dishcloth! You're useless! You're good for nothing! And you're not going to get away. I want you – see?'

'It seems to me,' I said to her, 'you're not being very logical.'

'Shut up!' shouted Juliette.

'I shall never marry,' I said, 'a woman who makes so much noise.'

There was a knock at the door. Madame Capoulet put her silly head round it.

'Quarrelling already?' she said with a smile I thought

extremely inane. 'But don't worry. One's always a bit nervy on one's wedding day. D'you know it's time we started?'

'Very well,' I said, 'we'll continue our quarrel en route.'

'Now come, come,' said Madame Capoulet, 'you know quite well a girl has to go to the Town Hall with her parents and not with her fiancé. It isn't done.'

I burst.

'Millions of things are done which shouldn't be done,' I yelled. 'Getting married is one of them. And if you want to be my mother-in-law I'll thank you to let me quarrel with Juliette before it's too late!'

I took Juliette by the arm and propelled her vigorously towards the landing.

'We'll meet you at the Town Hall!' I shouted to her mother, adding ferociously: 'Perhaps!'

I put the bride into a taxi.

'To the local Town Hall,' I told the driver, 'and take your time!'

He exchanged a wink with the hotel commissionaire and adjusted his driving mirror so as to miss nothing. Violently I pulled the partition window across and then turned to Juliette.

'Now,' I said, 'I want to talk to you. A little while ago you were rash enough to say I was something . . .'

' . . . A dishcloth,' she reminded me.

' . . . you *wanted*. I just thought I'd tell you that nobody's going to own me. I'm a free man and intend staying that way. D'you hear me, Juliette? No one's going to own me!'

'Aren't they?' said Juliette. 'Don't make me laugh.'

I didn't apparently.

'I love women,' I continued, 'and if you expect me to be faithful to you, you're making a mistake.'

'We'll see,' she said.

'Well, don't count on it,' I said. 'Not that you can count,'



Madame Capoulet

I added brutally. 'And that reminds me. If you want to be my wife these are my conditions. You'll keep a book in which you'll note down everything you spend. You'll superintend the cook if I can afford to have one. You'll set aside one day for doing the washing, one for mending, one for ironing. Every day you'll make the beds and every year you'll have a child until . . . well, I'll decide that later. I shall go out at night if I feel like it and you'll go early to bed so that you can be fresh for your housework in the morning. And you'll look pleased to see me, Juliette, when I come home at dawn, probably drunk and disorderly. I hope I've made myself clear?'

She put her hand on my arm.

'My darling,' she said, 'I always knew you were a buffoon.'

'It may sound like a joke,' I told her, 'but I swear it won't seem like one.'

I felt desperate.

'I shall do what I like,' she said gaily, 'and you'll be enchanted.'

'You're completely mad,' I told her.

'That's why you love me,' she said.

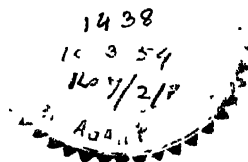
I rapped on the window and stopped the taxi. We were in the Avenue Georges Mendel.

'Drop us here,' I said to the driver, 'Mademoiselle needs some air.'

She was already on the pavement, her train hanging over her arm. By the trembling of her underlip I could see, with some satisfaction, that she was no longer in control of her nerves. I stood in front of her, waiting for the insults to which I would make pithy reply. But nothing came, nothing but tears, big round childish tears. I realized that in a second or two I should probably burst into tears myself.

'Oh, all right,' I said, 'come on!'

She raised her soaked eyes.



'I don't think I want to any more,' she sighed.

'Hit me,' I implored her. 'You'll feel so much better.'

She forced a smile.

'It wouldn't amuse me any more I'm afraid.'

'You'll see,' I gulped, leaning backwards to keep the tears in, 'it's going to be fun being married to me.'

'It's going to be hell!' she sobbed.

'All right,' I said, 'but do come along.'

I wanted to take her arm. She shook off my hand and started walking in front of me, wiping her eyes with her train. I put my top hat on my head and fell into step without saying a word. A lot of people looked at us with astonishment, as though they'd never seen a bride and bridegroom before.

I lengthened my steps and drew level with Juliette.

'If you go on crying,' I told her, blowing my nose, 'I shall make you go into the Town Hall alone.'

She made a sudden swerve and crossed the avenue, her veil flying in the wind. I caught up with her again. Silently and tearfully we succeeded in reaching the doors of the building.

I don't know how she managed it but when we stood before the Mayor she looked as radiant as . . . well, as radiant as a bride. He mumbled a number of things, probably very interesting but I wasn't listening, and then I heard him ask me whether I consented to take, as my wife, Mademoiselle Juliette Capoulet.

I was vaguely conscious of a silence in the hall, and then I got a violent blow in the ribs.

'What are you waiting for?' hissed Juliette.

'I'm thinking,' I whispered, rubbing my side.

'You're a fool!' she breathed.

'You think so?' I whispered.

'I'm sure of it.'

And so I shut my eyes and answered the Mayor.

'Oh well . . . yes,' I said.

CHAPTER TWO

Family Honeymoon

DURING our engagement Juliette had decided on an infinite variety of honeymoons. Geographically speaking, my brain wasn't working as energetically as a fiancée has the right to expect, and I thought I'd done enough by bringing her some travel leaflets.

'As you're so lazy,' said Juliette, 'I suggest Tahiti. It appears the men there do nothing whatsoever – ever. And neither do the women.'

'They're too busy making love,' I said. 'It takes them all their time.'

'Well then,' she said, stroking my cheek, 'that's the place for us. Making love all day and all night – it sounds a perfect programme, darling.'

'Juliette,' I sighed, 'I perceive with some dismay you're still extremely young.'

'Is that a reproach?'

'It's more in the nature of a worry, my darling! Perhaps it comes as news to you, but I am only a man. I'm beginning to wonder whether it wouldn't be more sensible to take you to the fjords of Norway.'

'If you like,' she said dreamily. 'I believe the nights last for twenty-four hours there.'

'That isn't absolutely true,' I said, 'and not at all true in the month of April. Still, it would be marvellous to see you bathing with nothing on.'

'Naked?'

'Completely naked in icy water surrounded by snow. I would stand in ecstasy before you . . .'

'On the bank I suppose?' she asked.

' . . . wearing an enormous fur coat.'

'I'd rather go to the Italian Lakes,' she said. 'Or Capri. It ought to be divine there in the spring.'

'We could visit Venice and Florence and Rome and see Naples before we died of love!' I cried, in a frenzy of enthusiasm.

Then I pulled myself together.

'What I can't quite figure out,' I said, 'is who's going to pay for all this.'

'My husband,' said Juliette.

'But your husband will be stony-broke.'

'In that case,' she gaily said, 'everything is over between us.'

'It was a lovely dream,' I sighed.

There was a silence, because Juliette had crept into my arms and I hadn't pushed her out again. Quickly I crunched a coffee bean.

'What about Morocco?' she asked. 'It wouldn't cost a lot what with my parents being there and everything.'

'Much as I adore her, I don't fancy having my honeymoon haunted by a mother-in-law.'

'No, of course. It was silly of me, darling.'

There was another silence, which occupied us for quite a while. Juliette can be devastatingly tender at times.

'When I'm a famous journalist,' I whispered, 'we'll take a lovely trip. In the meantime, d'you know what I think would be perfect? You and I, my sweet, we'll find a little place hidden away somewhere, far from tourists. We'll look for some secret hole in the country.'

'A rather *cheap* secret hole,' murmured Juliette pressing herself against me.

I couldn't see her face and I wondered if she was teasing

me. But no, it seemed not: she rubbed her nose against my chest. Her love for me had suddenly, impulsively, joined hands with economy. It was very encouraging.

Thus it was we decided we should spend our honeymoon with some cousins who owned a large house in Charente.

* * *

The journey passed without any noticeable incident. She had surreptitiously put my watch forward so that we shouldn't be late at the station, with the result that we arrived there an hour and a half too soon. Which was lucky because it gave me plenty of time to go back to the hotel for the tickets which she'd left behind. When I returned she was no longer where I'd parked her, which gave me occasion to run back and forth across the station like a demented collie. Needless to say she had seduced the ticket collector into allowing her through the barrier without a ticket and had charmed a porter into reserving her two window seats. This man, evidently identifying me by my haggard appearance, accosted me on the platform, touching his cap in a commiserating manner:

'Is it you, monsieur, whose little girl has been taken ill in the country?'

'No,' I told him, 'it's more likely my wife. . . .'

'Ah?' he said.

'... who's been taken ill. She's lost the tickets, tinkered with my watch, got me up at dawn after our wedding night . . . and what a night! . . . but that's none of your business, is it?'

'Not as far as I know, monsieur,' said the porter pensively.

'Incidentally, have you *seen* my wife?' I cried impatiently, pawing the ground.

The porter eyed me with disgust. 'Poor lady,' he said, 'so that's why she's upset! Her wedding night! And with her little girl ill too!'

At that moment I heard a piercing cry and there was Juliette leaning dangerously out of the window and flaying the air with her arms.

I can think of nothing especially interesting about the journey, except that when she threw a bottle of Eyan out of the carriage window it took the skin off the nose of a gentleman who was leaning out of the next window admiring the view. But Juliette produced an entrancing little first-aid kit and the gentleman offered his nose to her solicitations with what seemed to me exaggerated pleasure.

Uncle Fernand and his pig float were waiting for us at Ruffec station.

I had taken advantage of our trip to tell Juliette a number of things I thought she ought to know. She has a habit of running away and banging the door on topics she considers to be trifling. Sealed into a railway compartment she could only move about six feet lengthways and from one seat to the other crossways, and even then her movements were considerably handicapped by her neighbours' feet. I therefore had ample opportunity for delivering her a lecture on Uncle Fernand, who was going on for sixty, Aunt Anne-Marie, who was round about forty-five, and the five cousins, of various sexes and ages, who would all be there for the Easter holidays.

'Don't be insulting, darling,' said Juliette. 'Darling, I know how to handle people. Haven't you noticed?'

She leant her first finger on the end of my nose.

'And the pig float,' I said, 'I'd like to explain to you about the pig float.'

'Oh, for heaven's sake!' she cut in. 'Even if I haven't seen it I can imagine the pig float.'

Uncle Fernand climbed heavily down from his seat and came towards us holding in his hand his filthy felt hat. His face was what they call in novelettes 'garlanded with smiles'.

'We shall be friends, dear niece, of that I am certain,' he

said, gravely kissing her hand, 'and I am delighted to make your acquaintance.'

With a shining eye Juliette noted my uncle's flourish of manners, his white hair, his round pink cheeks.

'Oh! dearest Uncle!' she cried, 'what heavenly dimples you have! May I kiss you please?'

Uncle Fernand began to laugh, a little fatuously I thought, and offered each cheek in turn. After which, with much wiggling of his neatly trimmed moustache, he planted two noisy kisses on Juliette's cheeks. There seemed no end to it.

'It tickles!' said Juliette. 'It's lovely!' And turning to me: 'You really must let your moustache grow, darling.'

'Ah! So there you are, my boy!' said my uncle, pretending he had just discovered me. 'Well, well, my congratulations!'

At this moment Juliette gave a shriek of surprise.

'But it's a horse!' she cried.

She had stopped in front of the pig float.

'I can't deny it,' said my uncle, 'this *is* a horse.'

'And this . . . ?' said Juliette, 'it's a . . .'

'A pig float,' said my uncle. 'We take our pigs to market in t. I must apologize for being unable to offer a more worthy vehicle . . .'

'I thought . . . ' said Juliette.

She stopped abruptly. She had obviously thought a pig float was some sort of boat pulled by pigs.

* * *

My uncle had put two garden chairs in the back so that we could sit at ease and admire the scenery. It was the first time I had seen chairs in the pig float; usually there was just a board.

'Uncle Fernand,' announced Juliette, 'I refuse to sit in one of those chairs.'

I pinched her arm where I hoped it would hurt most.

'You'll hurt his feelings,' I muttered, 'he's just put them there in your honour.'

'Let me alone,' hissed Juliette.

She went on in a disgracefully wheedling tone:

'D'you know what I'd really like, Uncle? I'd like you to teach me how to drive.'

Uncle Fernand looked as gallant as he knew how.

'Your slightest wish is a command,' he said. 'But your poor husband? There isn't room for three on the front seat.'

'So what?' said Juliette. 'There are the chairs.'

They climbed up in front together and I found myself sitting in the back with the luggage.

Juliette took the reins, one in each hand.

'*Allez oop!*' she said.

The horse failed to understand – possibly it was her Parisian accent.

'He's called Pompon,' said my uncle, 'and you must click your tongue like this.'

'Like this?' said Juliette, mimicking him.

Pompon immediately responded. We crossed Ruffec at walking pace, my uncle bowing to right and left and cupping his hands like a megaphone round his mouth to yell:

'It's my new niece!'

Sometimes he added: 'Her husband is in the back.'

And he laughed in a way I didn't much care for.

We had to stop in front of the notary's house because he was an old friend of my uncle's and had to be shown Juliette immediately, without a moment's delay.

'Stop!' cried Juliette. And as the horse paid not the smallest attention: 'Stop! No, please stop!'

My uncle was laughing so much he couldn't cry 'Ouooh!' which was one of the only two words Pompon knew.

'Pull something,' I advised Juliette.

She pulled the right rein, and Pompon stepped docilely off

the road on to the pavement, directly in front of Maître Letestu's window. This gentleman, who had been lying in wait for hours behind his curtains to see *la parisienne*, on being confronted with the broad bland forehead of a horse looked as stupid as the horse probably felt.

My uncle was half-strangling himself with laughter. At last he managed to croak:

'Open the window, Letestu, I want to introduce you to my niece!'

Maître Letestu opened his window and the horse immediately poked its nose over the sill and went 'broouuh!' with a lot of wet fluttering of the nostrils.

'Charmed,' mumbled the notary, 'absolutely charmed.'

'We'll come back another time,' promised my uncle, 'to make a longer call.'

Pompon, possibly embarrassed by the strangeness of his environment, backed away from the window and returned to the street. We followed him.

'Forgive me!' cried Juliette. 'But I'm learning to drive.'

'So I see,' replied Maître Letestu, wiping his glasses. 'Absolutely splendid.'

'Trot, Pompon,' said Juliette.

I looked back. Maître Letestu was drying his cheeks, but he had replaced his glasses and was leaning far out of the window. My uncle took the whip.

'Between us,' he said, 'we're going to make things hum!'

The drive across Ruffec forest, the descent through the village of Taize-Aizié, the climb up the interminable hill on the crest of which stood the house, all was swallowed – the whole seven kilometres of it – in one hour and a quarter, the fastest time within Pompon's memory. At last the pig float turned beneath the tall hedgerows and the scrunch of its wheels on the gravel catapulted out our cousins, followed by Aunt Anne-Marie.

'Stop!' cried Juliette.

The horse wearily shook its head. Let her shout, let her pull: it had another five steps to take to bring the cart exactly in line with the front steps, and take them it would.

The two male and three female cousins eddied round us like little whirlpools. Aunt Anne-Marie breasted her way through the waves with great sweeps of her arms.

'How do you do, Juliette!' she cried.

She held out a horny hand. Into it Juliette placed her tiny one and had it vigorously shaken.

Juliette stood up and remained poised there, perplexed as to the best way of making a landing. From André, aged nineteen, to Emmanuel, aged nine, with the three girls sandwiched between, there were five faces raised to hers like hungry fish bobbing on the surface of a pond.

'Look out, I'm going to jump!' cried Juliette.

It was André who caught her in his arms. At his age I would have blushed to the roots of my eyelashes. But not André: he assumed the falsely modest air of a young cock who has just crowed for the first time. Juliette noticed it, of course – she always has an eye for such things – and I knew she was perfectly delighted.

'André,' I cried, 'we *also* have luggage!'

They were all a good deal shyer than they pretended, and they hurled themselves on the luggage in a wildly agitated manner.

'Let me take this bag!'

'Get off my feet!'

'Look out, that's my dressing-case!'

'Get out of the way, you idiot!'

'She asked *me* to take her dressing-case!'

'Follow us, Juliette,' said my aunt, 'and we'll take you to see your room.'

Isabelle, the eldest, had drawn near.

'We call it the Methuselah room,' she said softly. 'Everything in it is very old. I hope it won't surprise you too much.'

In the middle of the room, solemn as a throne, stood a canopied bed. The curtains hanging from the corkscrew bed-posts were of tapestry, and the same tapestry covered an arm-chair, a chaise longue and all four walls including the doors. Carved round the valance of the bed were the twelve apostles ambling along in Indian file.

'There!' said Aunt Anne-Marie, 'I think you've got everything.'

'How spoilt we are,' said Juliette. 'This room is tremendously romantic!'

'Yes, it *is*!' yelled Catherine who was thirteen, 'it *is* a tremendously romantic room!'

'Come, children,' said Aunt Anne-Marie. 'And a little less exuberance please. Your cousin must want to rest after her journey.'

'Oh no!' said Juliette. 'When I've had a bath I shall feel like a queen.'

This remark had the effect a deluge sometimes has on a high wind. There was a damp and deathly hush. Not the smallest sign of exuberance; everyone stood as if congealed. I attempted some diplomatic manoeuvring.

'If there ~~was~~ a bit of room on your stove,' I suggested, 'we might perhaps heat some water in the wash tub . . . just for an extensive wash I mean . . . the train. . . '

'We haven't a bathroom,' explained Isabelle with tears in her eyes. 'I've been asking Maman for years to get one installed.'

'When Papa sells a calf,' commented little Emmanuel, 'Maman saves the money to buy a cow! She thinks it's more important.'

'Mané!' yelled Aunt Anne-Marie, 'run along!'

'But we *have* got a little zinc bath,' said Isabelle, woman of the world, mistress of the situation.

'But it's in the apple loft!' mocked Catherine.

'Would you like me to clean it out, Maman?' asked Henriette who, being only eleven, was still excessively good-natured.

'No, stay here!' shouted my aunt.

Henriette unhesitatingly ran off with the other children in the direction of the apple loft.

'I *am* so sorry about this,' said Juliette. 'I can manage perfectly well without a bath – really I can!'

'You will have your bath,' said Aunt Anne-Marie. 'I insist upon it.'

She announced this as though it were a punishment.

The tapestry stirred and Mané put his curly head round the creaking door.

'There are apples in the bath,' he said. 'We're getting them out. It may take a little time.'

* * *

The wells in front of the house were dried up (they had been so ever since my childhood). I carried buckets from the cistern at the bottom of the garden to the kitchen, I emptied them into the wash tub, I heaved the tub on to the stove, I got some wood to make up the fire, and when the water was hot I carried it, bucket by bucket, to the bath in the loft. I also threw in one bucket of cold and kept two of tepid with which to douche Juliette's ravishing body. This last labour considerably alleviated my fatigue even if it didn't totally dissipate it.

I recovered my breath in our bedroom while she applied a last touch of mascara to her lovely eyes. Exquisitely dressed, powdered and scented, she stood in front of the mantelpiece, staring fixedly at her reflection in the pier-glass, and murmured:

'I'm not going down to dinner.'

'Oh nonsense!' I replied. 'What on earth's the matter?'

'I'm far too elegant,' she sighed.

'Rubbish, darling! We're not living with savages! And anyhow,' I added, to reassure her: 'your dress is a bit outlandish anyway.'

'Oh it is, is it?' she said, sucking her bottom lip, which is a sure sign of impending storm. Then she came and put her head on my shoulder (it hurt abominably). 'Oh, my darling . . . I'm so fed up with myself! Don't you see how ashamed I am of being such a useless creature?'

With a scream of pain I took her in my arms. I even managed with Spartan courage to carry her to our tapestried sofa where, at the cost of some small disarrangement to her toilette, I persuaded her of her inestimable worth. She had a triumphant face when later she marched into the kitchen where the children, in their Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes, were circulating round the table like flies. Aunt Anne-Marie chased them off with a flick of the hand and they altered course and went to dip their fingers in the mayonnaise.

'What are you doing here?' she asked, in a tone which struggled to be friendly but only succeeded in being firm.

Juliette had almost forgotten, but not quite.

'I've come to help,' she said.

'Don't be funny, dear. Go into the drawing-room, will you?'

'But I'm so upset at giving you all this trouble,' said Juliette.

'Trouble! Trouble! Don't be absurd. It's like this every day. Ah! You don't know yet what it is to be married!'

'Please come,' whispered Isabelle. 'No one's ever been able to help Maman.'

Aunt Anne-Marie didn't appear in the dining-room until everyone was assembled.

'Oh, Maman!' groaned Isabelle, 'you're still wearing that ugly old dress!'

'What if I am?' grumbled my aunt. 'If you think I've got time to tittivate myself . . .'

Her eye was suddenly caught by Uncle Fernand's button-hole from which sprouted a delicate mauve flower.

'My crocuses!' roared Aunt Anne-Marie. 'Who gave you permission . . . and I've been nursing them for months!'

'My dear,' said my uncle calmly and inconsequently, 'it would give me great pleasure if you would consent to crown our little celebration by putting on that dress I like so much, you know, that dress . . .'

'Maman, please . . .'

The children crowded round her pulling at her skirt, and at last she allowed herself, grumblingly, to yield.

'Very well,' she said, 'I won't be a moment.'

'Let us be seated then,' said my uncle.

He placed Juliette on his right, then sat down himself. He unfolded his napkin, and fastened it to two gold grips at the end of a cord, which he had briskly thrown over his shoulder like a skipping rope. Smoothing the napkin over his stomach, he stroked his moustache, and heaved a sigh of content. After a while he began fidgeting.

'I suppose the soup is ready . . .' he suggested hopefully.

'Let me go and fetch it,' said Juliette.

Everyone tried to stop her.

'No, no, please let me . . . I'd so love to feel I was being useful.'

She returned radiant, holding aloft the soup tureen. Aunt Anne-Marie, who was racing at breakneck speed down the stairs, buttoning her sleeves as she came, met the tureen in the hall. A sharp explosion, a silence, and the soup slowly spread across the whole surface of our 'little celebration'.

* * *



‘Who gave you permission ... ?’

Juliette had wanted to draw the bed curtains to make it more romantic. After all, it was the first night of our honeymoon *en famille*. I behaved, I hope, in a sufficiently romantic manner, and when I had fallen asleep I had nightmares.

Juliette, to make herself 'useful', rode through the house on a broom. The buckets flew in squadrons about her, the wash-tub hovered dangerously above her head and then, as I expected it would, descended on it like a dish cover. The next I saw of my love she was in a hearse drawn by Pompon and driven by the notary. It was taking both of us to the cemetery. I suffocated in this hearse, the curtains of which had been malevolently sewn together. I woke in a sweat . . . or perhaps I wasn't quite awake? Anyhow I extended my arm, not without difficulty as it was stiff as a board. I met a twisted bed-post, then Juliette's body lying helpless (or dead) at my side. I shook it, I pinched it, I made it jump like a frog.

'I'm so happy,' I told her, 'to find we're not dead.'

She wound herself round me.

'Me too, my love. . . '

Our bodies were kindled anew and it seemed certain that the flames of this romance, at any rate, would never die. At dawn she pretended she was sleepy. She kissed me again for the last time.

'You see,' she murmured, 'when you're feeling happy it isn't necessary to pinch me to make me sympathetic.'

CHAPTER THREE

‘...above all, do not break the skin’

AUNT ANNE-MARIE had apparently forgotten about the soup tureen – or if not forgotten at any rate forgiven. It is true that during the next few days Juliette behaved with astonishing discretion, wooing my aunt so skilfully that I became quite anxious.

My aunt would go by in her big clogs carrying a basket and a pair of secateurs.

‘Aunt Anne-Marie!’ Juliette would call, ‘will you be an angel and show me how to do that stitch – you know, the one your green sweater is in? I’d so love to knit one like it for Jean.’

And my aunt would spend half an hour showing Juliette stitches.

Juliette showed a real talent for playing the awkward child. She always managed to get under my aunt’s feet at the most inopportune moments. If Aunt Anne-Marie was busy making a sauce Juliette would appear to ask:

‘About these cuttings! I didn’t quite grasp what you said yesterday. If it isn’t too much bother . . .’

And Aunt Anne-Marie would skimp the sauce because there was nothing she enjoyed more than a bother.

‘Don’t do too much,’ she would urge Juliette, who did absolutely nothing. ‘Have a good rest.’ One day she added: ‘You’ve got rings round your eyes, dearest Juliette. Tomorrow morning I forbid you to get up before ten.’

The next day my aunt, who rose at dawn, brought Juliette her breakfast in our antique bed.

'Aunt Anne-Marie,' sighed this depraved creature, 'I sometimes wonder how I shall *ever* manage without you. . . .'

That day she agreed to lie out under the magnolia. André brought her a deck chair and sat down beside her while she studied a book of recipes, starting methodically at A and slowly working her way through the alphabet. Sometimes when I was passing I caught snatches of their fascinating conversation. Juliette told me the rest.

'Do you like *l'aloë à l'oseille*?' she asked.

'I adore *l'aloë à l'oseille*,' said my cousin. 'What is it?'

'And *beignets de fraises*? and *beurre d'écrevisses*? And a *chartreuse de pigeons*? Does Aunt Anne-Marie know how to make a pigeon *chartreuse*?'

'Maman? Of course. She knows how to make everything.'

'Soon it will be six o'clock,' said Juliette, 'and she will be going to fetch grass for the rabbits.'

'If you like the idea,' said André, grown suddenly enterprising, 'we two might try to cook something together one day.'

'Might we?' said Juliette giving him a limpid look. 'Are you sure it wouldn't bore you?'

'It wouldn't bore me at all,' replied my young cousin soulfully.

'A special dish for Aunt Marie, then,' said Juliette primly.

'Oh, to hell with it!' said André.

'To hell with what?'

'Nothing.'

'But what have I said?'

'At six o'clock what does Maman do?'

'She goes to fetch . . .'

' . . . food . . .'

' . . . for the rabbits.'

'At seven o'clock?'

'She goes and milks the cow,' said Juliette.

'And at eight o'clock she sees to the dinner and at half past nine she helps Maria wash up.'

'And tomorrow?'

'She starts all over again,' said Juliette smiling.

'And the day after tomorrow?'

'She starts all over again.'

'That's wrong, as it happens,' said André, 'she's going to the Fair. But you see what I mean?'

'No I don't.'

'You're obsessed with her.' Then he added suddenly: 'Are you in love with your husband or with my mother?'

Juliette eyed him calmly. 'I'm afraid you're going to turn into a very indiscreet young man,' she said. 'Pity. If you were discreet I'd make you a confession.'

'Confess away!' said André nonchalantly.

'Well then,' said Juliette, 'I think your mother is a wonderful woman and I'd like her to like me a little.'

'Don't bust yourself. It's in the bag!' said André.

It was at this moment that Juliette took a big decision.

'What would you say,' she asked, 'to a galantine of chicken?'

'Foul murder most fair,' said André.

'Very erudite,' said Juliette, 'but don't bust yourself! Now I do so want to win your mother's approval. While she's at the Fair we'll kill a beautiful chicken and then . . .'

' . . . One has to kill it the night before,' interrupted André.

Juliette said coldly: 'Perhaps we'd better study this cookery book together for a moment.'

'It will be the happiest moment of my life,' sighed my impudent young cousin.

* * *

I decided to take part in the proceedings. Obviously there would be a catastrophe – it could hardly be avoided – and I had a macabre wish to be there when it happened.

The chicken was caught during the course of the morning, between eleven and twelve o'clock when Aunt Anne-Marie had gone off to Chambon – one of her small farms – to decide which little pigs should go to market. Juliette stood solidly planted in the middle of the farmyard surrounded by chickens which André had mustered with handfuls of corn. She contemplated them while biting her thumb.

'The books says we need a young chicken but it must be well developed. The best age is between eight and twelve months. André, how on earth does one tell a chicken's age?'

'If it was a horse, of course,' said André solemnly, 'one would look at its teeth.'

'I know *that*,' said Juliette. 'But we can't catch all these chickens.'

'And even,' said André, 'if we could, it wouldn't be a frightfully accurate way – not until chickens grow teeth, that is.'

'Ah!' said Juliette. She reflected for a minute and then said frigidly: 'There's no need to be insolent.'

'Then I won't be it again,' said André appeasingly. 'Supposing we let the dog loose in the yard? We could see then which chicken had the best legs.'

Juliette was no longer listening to him. She extended an arm.

'There's one,' she said, 'who looks both young and plump. The cock seems tremendously taken with her. Let's murder the poor thing at once!'

The farmyard was vast and the hen had wings. But so had Juliette. The chase ended under a wood pile where the hen, thoroughly out of breath, had sought refuge. Juliette, over-excited and thirsting for revenge, strangled it on the spot. André took charge of the blood-letting. Then he took his cousin and the bird to the orchard, where, crouched behind a fallen tree trunk, he smothered them in a cloud of feathers.

There remained only the business of divorcing the animal from its entrails, which Juliette, holding her nose, insisted on doing herself.

'If you could have seen me,' she confided afterwards, 'my hands red with blood . . . you would have been proud.'

'In every perfect wife,' I told her, kissing her hands (newly washed), 'there is a little bit of the butcher.'

The chicken was taken down to the cellar in great secrecy and hidden in a basket behind a barrel. In the afternoon André bicycled into Ruffec with a shopping list written out by Juliette.

'I've just realized,' she said to me, 'how terribly hard a woman's life can be. Aunt Anne-Marie won't be home from the Fair till two o'clock and we shan't eat till two-thirty. But even so if I want to surprise her with my galantine I'll have to start work on it at six in the morning.'

'You obviously can't do that,' I said, 'unless you want her to catch you in the kitchen before she goes.'

'Well then, I shall just have to bone the animal in our bedroom,' sighed Juliette.

After everyone had gone to bed I went and fetched the chicken from behind the barrel and laid it, along with a large knife, on the marble top of our bedside table. I woke in the early hours with one of its feet in my mouth.

'You're snoring,' said Juliette. Dishevelled, she was boning away like mad. 'Here, for heaven's sake take the book,' she said, 'and read out to me what it says.'

I buried myself in the pillow, held the book in both hands, and read out the instructions.

'Cut off the feet and wings . . .'

'Faster!' said Juliette. 'I've done that.'

'Split the skin down the back. Then using your hands and a knife . . .'

'Not so fast!' said Juliette. 'You seem to think it's easy.'

There was a silence and then I heard:

'This is dreadfully ticklish work.'

I began to feel extremely drowsy and I noted, as from a distance, my book drooping on to the quilt. I was brusquely shaken.

'It's split,' said Juliette. 'Now *do* go on.'

I picked up the book again.

'... your hands and a knife, detach the meat from the bones.'

This time I managed to get right off to sleep. A roar brought me leaping out of bed.

'If you knew how it irritated me,' yelled Juliette, 'to see you sleeping!'

'Mould,' I answered dazedly, 'the meat of the legs and wings into fillets the size of a little finger. I'm going to shave.'

As she had used our basin to hold the mangled morsels she had wrung from the bird, I had to go and wash in the cistern at the end of the kitchen garden. I returned to announce that Aunt Anne-Marie with Pompon, Isabelle, little Mané, the maid and the piglets had departed for the Fair. We carried the basin down to the kitchen. It was zero hour. Time to make the stuffing. We took up battle positions. André was in reserve. The war was on.

I placed on the table some scales, a chopper, two salad bowls, a basin, salt, pepper, spices and some tablespoons.

'No,' said Juliette, 'I don't want that sort of spoon. I must have stirrers.'

'André,' I said, 'we must have stirrers.'

'Certainly,' said André, 'you can have stirrers. But what are they?'

'I'm trying hard not to get annoyed with you,' said Juliette tapping her book, 'because obviously one can't know everything. But everyone, my dear André, knows that a stirrer is

a wooden spoon. It's useful,' she added tetchily, 'for prising open hens' mouths to look at their teeth.'

We chopped. Juliette pounded.

'When I think,' said André, 'that I passed my school certificate for this.'

'Chop,' said Juliette.

'Enough,' said André, laying down his implement. 'I never knew your wife was such a bully.'

'I've squeezed and drained like it said,' announced Juliette serenely. 'Now bring me your bits and I'll season them. André, the fire!'

The cookery book had, apparently, no rules for judging stuffing. One simply had to taste it and see. André would have preferred more pepper in the first croquette submitted to his judgement. I thought mine needed a little parsley. However, the results of our efforts were so satisfactory that we decided to eat a round of croquettes then and there. Henriette, who was finishing her elevenses, commanded us to spread one on her bread and butter and she strongly advised the addition of some spring onions.

'And this fish?' I asked. 'What's that for? The trimmings?'

There was a magnificent pike floating pensively about in a pail. On Juliette's orders André had bicycled into Ruffec to buy it and he had obviously made the return trip at break-neck speed for the creature still had a jaunty fin and a fresh if somewhat angry eye.

'Don't bother me,' said Juliette.

She rarely listens to what one says. It's her least failing.

It was nearly eleven o'clock. Juliette laid the boneless chicken on what had been its back and covered its interior with a layer of stuffing. Then she carefully superimposed a layer of sliced chicken, veal and pork. Then another layer of stuffing. Then another layer of slices. We began to think cooking was a very routine affair.

'When I'm married,' said André, 'we shall eat out of tins. I don't want to hurt your feelings but I've decided I'm going to marry an intellectual. A woman like Simone de Veauvoir. By the way, what do you think of her *Troisième Sexe*?'

'I have been told on good authority,' I corrected him, 'that there are only two.'

'I read in *France Dimanche*,' said André, 'that it's luridly existentialist.'

A cry of despair cut short our witty backchat.

'This hole!' wailed Juliette.

'What hole?'

We all bent over.

'*This* hole!'

I looked at André and André looked at me.

'The book distinctly said,' moaned Juliette, 'above all do not break the skin. And I've made a colossal hole!'

I could see she was on the point of tears.

'No, but Juliette, this hole,' I said, 'surely it's . . . natural?'

'Be quiet!' she shouted, 'will you kindly shut up! Natural indeed!'

'But . .

'Shut up! If only you'd helped me instead of sleeping, my chicken wouldn't have had a hole!'

'We can't be absolutely sure of that,' I replied coldly. 'But as you're taking it like this I can only suggest you make a darn of some sort.'

'Would you like an egg?' André suavely suggested. 'My mother always uses an egg when she's darning socks.'

'D'you think I don't know that?' said Juliette. 'I read it ages ago in a housekeeping manual.'

We brought her an egg, a needle and two balls of string and we watched her gleefully as she darned up the hen's behind. Then Juliette, her soul at peace at last, finished stuffing the bird, replacing, in unnatural disorder, the lungs,

heart and liver and then stitching up the rest of its torso into a kind of greasy ball. This she proceeded to sculpt into the shape of a chicken.

At this stage the book placidly announced: 'Cook for 5 hours, or 6, depending on the toughness of the fowl.' By making some rapid calculations we foresaw – though a trifle late – that though the galantine might conceivably be ready for dinner it would certainly not be ready for luncheon. We sat down, the three of us, on the hearthstone.

'I can't help wondering,' sighed Juliette, 'what Aunt Anne-Marie is going to think of me. I've assassinated one of her chickens and made a shambles of her kitchen.'

The kitchen certainly looked like a bargain basement after a bombardment.

'Maybe we should have done better to have gone fishing,' said André.

'After goldfish?' I asked. 'In the pond at Chambon? Are they still there? When I was little I used to take one home in a bowl every year.'

Quite suddenly we were all seized with an overpowering sense of weariness. With the smallest encouragement we would have dropped dead from exhaustion. However we were roused from our torpor by the pike, which attracted our attention with an authoritative flip of its tail against the side of the pail.

'What,' I said again, only more forcefully this time, 'is this fish *for*?'

'Yes!' cried André. 'Why did you send me to buy a fish, Juliette?'

Juliette bowed her head in her two hands.

'I've forgotten,' she said, 'I haven't the faintest idea. I can't remember.' Suddenly she jumped up. 'Yes I can!' she cried. 'It was because the book said so!'

Feverishly she flipped over its pages, then dropped it again.

'I thought it was a printing mistake,' she wailed. 'It says "Remove all meat from the *wishbone*," not,' she added in a shamefaced whisper, 'the fish bone.'

'I've married an idiot,' I muttered.

She raised a pair of supplicating eyes.

'But, Jean, what is a wishbone?'

'You don't know what a wishbone is?'

'No . . . no.' The little liar hung herself on to my shoulder. I made a sudden resolve . . . to be nice.

'Neither do I,' I said with the utmost tenderness.

That is why Juliette's surprise dish for her Aunt Anne-Marie, her Uncle Fernand, her little cousins and her husband was a pike garnished with goldfish. And as we'd forgotten to take out the roes the entire family was healthily purged during the afternoon.

This enabled us to attack Juliette's galantine voraciously that evening. Everyone agreed it was a great moment in the annals of culinary art; everyone, that is, except Uncle Fernand who didn't appreciate the gall in the liver. Also it was deplored that Juliette should have chosen a hen which obviously would have laid a lovely egg if its bottom hadn't been sewn together. But little Mané had no complaints. He had a most entertaining time pulling the string – half a ball of which Juliette had left in the stuffing – out of the chicken's inside to make a neat pile on the tablecloth.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Phenomenon

NEVER, since housekeeping began, had there been so much china broken. This was the galantine's fault. Not, I would have you know, because we had thrown the crockery at Juliette's head. On the contrary, we had enjoyed her chicken – had even eaten it, apart from the gall and the string, with genuine pleasure – and we had predicted for her a sensational future in the kitchen. Her first attempt, by and large, bore all the signs of a potentially successful housekeeper: she had, after all, only broken one plate. Unfortunately she had become slightly intoxicated with her success and our hopes were rudely dashed. Instead of continuing in her role of the jaded butterfly she set up her honeymoon headquarters in the kitchen, and in three days it was a hecatomb.

Juliette was dead set on winning Aunt Anne-Marie's approbation. She began by testing her patience, a virtue with which my aunt had never been abundantly blessed (infinitely less than I am, for example). My cousins were in a state of perpetual astonishment. How did Juliette manage it? As if I knew how Juliette managed anything!

'It doesn't seem possible!' I said to her. 'Or are you working on some system?'

She laughed. Every time she broke something she burst out laughing. After two years of profound study I am further than ever from understanding what is so especially comical about scattered débris, and even in those days I was pretty far. My aunt, however, was in no doubt at all. She was in des-

pair. She tried to save what was left of her crockery by keeping Juliette as far away from the kitchen as possible.

'Here, darling Juliette,' she said, 'as you're so eager to learn, take this broom, and if you happen to meet any fragile pieces of furniture, give them a wide berth.'

Juliette went off with her broom, and the atmosphere in the kitchen became easier. Suddenly a loud burst of laughter reached us from the drawing-room. Everyone froze.

'I'm terribly sorry . . .' I murmured – but I knew if I lived to be a thousand I could never be sorry enough.

We raced across the dining-room: one panel of the glass cabinet was punctured, one Chantilly crystal ewer inside it had succumbed.

'It's not . . .' stammered Juliette through her giggles, ' . . . it's not my fault . . . it was the broom handle. It went through the pane.'

'One can see at a glance,' I said to my aunt in my most sarcastic tone, 'that it was the broom's fault. It has a particularly evil appearance. It should be punished! As for this woman, you can have her. I give her to you.'

'You are very kind,' said my aunt, 'but it's not a present I should have chosen for myself, exactly.'

And I, had I chosen it? this bolt fallen from the blue on to a bar stool? I realized it was a bit late to ask myself this question for the first time. But the answer was no, I hadn't, I couldn't have. It must have chosen me. I found myself toying with dreams of divorce. Even today, when Juliette breaks a plate I promise myself I'll divorce her.

Uncle Fernand had arrived, attracted by the noise. Juliette, no longer laughing, almost looked as if she was suffering a little. I was in a fine mood to console her!

'Go and sit on the terrace,' I told her, 'at an equal distance between the flower pots, and don't move until I come and fetch you.'

'From now on,' said Aunt Anne-Marie dryly, 'you will oblige me by abstaining from all housework in my house.'

'I'll go and pick up the pieces,' I said to my aunt.

That is evidently what I was born for – to pick up pieces!

I left Juliette slumped against a corner of a window in the dining-room. When I returned with a dustpan and brush her face was sparkling like a sunny meadow after a shower. She put her fingers to her lips.

'Incapable, hopeless, good-for-nothing girl!' said my aunt's voice, through the half-opened drawing-room door.

'But we need them,' replied my uncle's, 'we need them. A useless woman, it seems to me, is an enchanting thing.'

'I'll thank you,' answered my aunt, 'to go and tell that to someone else!'

Suddenly she exploded.

'No, it's too much! I who've drudged from morning till night every day of God's long week, every day, do you hear, since I married you!'

'True, my dear, true. . . .'

There was a silence, the length of a sigh.

'Anne-Marie, do you remember Monte Carlo? We were young . . . everything seemed so polished, so elegant. I know this sounds ridiculous, but when Juliette is there I feel like a jaunty young man just setting off to a casino.'

'Look at my hands!' said my aunt harshly. 'My hands worn to the bone in this house!'

'I don't reproach you for them,' said my uncle gently.

'That's too kind of you,' said Aunt Anne-Marie with an ironic laugh. 'I was under the impression you would have preferred a woman like that little . . .'

' . . . Yes, isn't she?' interrupted my uncle in a dreamy voice. 'Just like a child . . .'

' . . . like that little moron! Moron, do you hear? Tell me, do you know of a single thing she *can* do?'

‘Make love. . . .

My uncle released this atom bomb in an almost inaudible voice. He added, even more inaudibly:

‘I beg your pardon.’

There was no sound from Aunt Anne-Marie. I suddenly realized that in a moment Juliette would push open the door and fling herself into her aunt’s arms. I dragged her towards the garden.

‘Don’t be mad,’ I hissed.

‘Why not?’ said Juliette. ‘She’s so unhappy!’

‘There are some people who don’t like having their hearts pried into. Particularly in my family.’

‘The heart . . .’ began Juliette.

‘Yes,’ I cut in, ‘to save a heart you would, I know, dare all. But sometimes your courage can make things atrociously uncomfortable for others – and for yourself. If Talleyrand had known you, do you know what he would have said to you?’

‘Oh b— Talleyrand,’ said Juliette.

‘He’d have said to you: “Mind the first step. It’s the one that counts.”’

Juliette pondered over this, her eyebrows drawn into a frown. I could have kissed her.

‘I dare say you’re right,’ she said at last. ‘But isn’t it sad?’ She raised her head and smiled.

‘Why don’t you kiss me?’

‘Because I too am minding the first step.’

‘Gloomy old ass,’ she said.

She took a handful of my hair in her fist and pulled my face towards hers. I cracked a coffee bean. When we had recovered our breath she said:

‘Kissing tidies up such a lot of things, doesn’t it?’

‘It would be even better,’ I scolded, ‘if a lot of things didn’t need tidying up.’

‘Look at Aunt Anne-Marie,’ she answered. ‘Don’t you



Uncle Fernand

think it's because she's too perfect that Uncle Fernand forgets to "tidy her up"?"

At once I smelt danger.

'No, no,' I cried, 'you simply mustn't think that!'

'All the same,' she said, 'I do. Listen carefully to what I'm going to say: from tomorrow onwards I'm going to renounce perfection.'

She has kept her word.

* * *

At the same time she renounced all efforts to win my aunt's commendation for her domestic prowess, and she did wisely. She would have met with nothing but frustration, for as soon as a member of the family saw her near any object which wasn't made of wood or iron, he ran to take it out of her hands. So Juliette's last days in the country passed in delicious idleness.

As soon as I opened the window after our consistently romantic nights, the village of Aizié, tumbling down into the valley like a cascade, was silvered by the April dawn; and in the evening it was veiled in a golden dust. We lay down in the meadows among constellations of daisies and we felt as glorious as the world looked. The primroses were in flower. I promised Juliette they would never fade and Juliette believed what I said (incidentally, so did I). I took her to admire the views I had loved best in my childhood; Lisonne at the bottom of the hill with its washerwomen beating their linen, and in the other valley, behind the house, the village of Lizaut astride its two streams, la Cloche and la Sonnette. Their tinkling peals rang separate tunes until they joined each other by the bridge called Chansons, one minute before they got lost in the Charente.

'What names!' said Juliette ecstatically.

Even the peasants seemed poetic creatures. Their Easter costumes enchanted her, as did the little branches of box, duly

blessed and stuck into the corners of allotments to bring prosperity, and the egg-shells sprinkled with holy water buried beside them.

'Do you know why they are pleased when eggs hatch out on Good Friday? Because they believe the chickens born then won't have any gall. The old people even say that the cocks from these clutches crow three times in Advent, like St Peter's cock.'

'Every night?'

'Three times a night.'

'I should have put you to hatch on Good Friday,' said Juliette with, I think, unnecessary coarseness.

* * *

Juliette, having nothing more to break, regained her natural self-confidence. But I had thwarted her heart's desire to comfort Aunt Anne-Marie in her misfortune, and something was bound to come of it eventually. I saw she was on the look-out for a suitable occasion.

The occasion did not arise. Aunt Anne-Marie had resumed her role of half-ant and half-woman and didn't offer the smallest crack through which Juliette could pour in her heart. So she followed my aunt into the kitchen garden and said, with profound sympathy:

'Your grapes are magnificent.'

'Yes,' replied my aunt, 'except that they're going to be beans.'

They went off together to visit the farms, my aunt with her long strides and bent over like a reaper, Juliette very tall and straight on her high heels, her hair blowing in the wind. In the farmyard the geese foraged for worms, oscillating their necks to assist the worms on their downward journey.

'Aren't they adorable with their noses in the air like that?' said Juliette. 'They look as if they wanted me to stroke them.'

She held out her hand and only just escaped getting it bitten off by making a flying retreat. A little three-weeks'-old mule, galvanized into action by the excitement, started to chase her.

'Help! Help!' yelled Juliette, seeking refuge behind my aunt and seizing her round the waist.

'Perhaps it would be better to go and see the lambs,' suggested the latter, adding in a considerate manner: 'I do hope they won't hurt you.'

'Oh yes, do let's! You don't know how I adore animals! It must be thrilling to rear a Paschal lamb.' Placing an understanding hand on Aunt Anne-Marie's arm, she added: 'It must console you when life seems unbearably hard.'

'The market for these animals is at its most favourable in April,' replied my aunt. 'So any Paschal lambs we have we sell.'

My cousins were beginning to bewail the end of their holidays when an unfortunate event occurred to obscure the last crescent of our honeymoon: a little duck, barely out of its egg, showed signs of mortal sickness. Aunt Anne-Marie installed it next to the stove in a box filled with old rags. She concocted a delicious brew of chopped nettles mixed with bran, and holding the duckling in the hollow of her hand, implored it to gargle with it. But the little duck seemed disgusted with life in general and with nettles in particular.

No one, neither André, Isabelle, Henriette, Catherine, little Mané, nor even Uncle Fernand went through the kitchen without first enquiring of the duck as to the state of its health – which was becoming less and less rude.

'Maman, Auguste isn't going to die, is he?' asked Mané.

'And what if he is?' grumbled Aunt Anne-Marie. 'It would just be another dead duck.'

'And a very puny one too,' observed Isabelle who prided herself on her good sense. 'The important thing is that his brothers and sisters get nice and plump for eating.'

'I like duck's liver even better than I like goose's liver,' said André, that experienced *bon viveur*. 'It's far more subtle, more scented. Still, I'm very much afraid we're never going to eat Auguste's liver.'

The night of the second day Aunt Anne-Marie made a woolly nest in the oven and popped Auguste into it. In our big canopied bed Juliette and I exchanged forebodings.

'If only I was allowed to touch it,' said Juliette. 'But I can't even get near it. They're afraid I'll break it or something.'

'Perhaps they're right, darling. It's fragile, you know.'

'I'm terribly afraid it won't last the night,' sighed Juliette.

'That's probably better than a long drawn out agony,' I replied.

My solemnity suddenly astounded me and I sat up abruptly.

'Don't you think we're all getting a bit fatuous about this duckling?' I enquired.

Juliette answered that I had no heart and went crossly to sleep.

The next day, during luncheon, the maid came and told us that Auguste was having the gapes. Evidently he was about to 'pass on'. We all raced to his bedside.

'He has a glassy eye,' said André.

'It's the end,' said Aunt Anne-Marie in a slightly strained voice.

'Let *me* have him,' cried Juliette vehemently. We all stared at her, filled with dread.

'In the condition he's in,' said my uncle, 'she can't do him much harm.'

Juliette took Auguste in the palms of her two hands and held him tightly clasped.

'Maman, she'll suffocate him!' wailed Henriette. And she started to cry. Auguste opened a beak larger than himself.

'I believe she *is* going to squash him!' said André.

But Juliette heard none of this. She bent her face down

and began to breathe gently into Auguste's gaping beak.

'Go on,' said my aunt, 'you're doing just right.'

Juliette breathed on, still holding the duck tightly between her palms. And now we felt certain Auguste was going to recover. Which he did. He gave something like a sneeze and then he started to shiver. Juliette, beaming, opened her hands and tickled his behind with a finger. The little duck snorted, pulled in his head, stuck it out again. Everyone showered him with congratulations. He responded by pecking at Juliette's cheek.

Juliette held out her arms to Aunt Anne-Marie and offered her Auguste as though on a plate. I don't know if my aunt realized that she was offering her her heart at the same time.

'Here's someone,' she said to Auguste, 'who thoroughly deserves a nip of brandy. And you too, my little Juliette.'

André, who was always handy in emergencies, ran to fetch the bottle of cognac.

'One up to you,' said Uncle Fernand.

Juliette picked up the duck in one hand and the bottle in the other.

'I would like a little spoon,' she said.

At this juncture Auguste fluttered his wings so abruptly, so vigorously, so unexpectedly, that Juliette let go of the bottle. Consternation as well as brandy spread through the kitchen. Then Juliette burst out laughing and I could feel a cold sweat breaking out on my back at her tactlessness. I shut my eyes. When I opened them again my uncle, aunt and cousins were holding their sides, victims of uncontrollable giggles.

As a result of this adventure, the family decided that I had married a woman gifted with supernatural powers, which explained but did not entirely excuse her bewildering behaviour. And because she was evidently so enamoured of splintered china she was christened 'fakir'. She promised that on her next visit she would eat ground glass.

CHAPTER FIVE

... knock his head off, darling

No, really no! I believe I can say in all sincerity that I did *not* get married simply to have a quiet life. Nevertheless I did not intend my married life to be a perpetual drama. I shall never understand why some women have such a perverse taste for excitement. It seems they can't believe they are loved unless they are loved melodramatically. Peace, to me, has always seemed eminently desirable; and as I have never achieved it, I haven't changed my mind. I think all men, or at any rate all those who are still at the hopeful stage, share my point of view.

I daresay when at last one does establish a peaceful household it immediately becomes a matter of great urgency to leave it. They quote the case of the rat which, having eaten a hole in a Dutch cheese, continued its efforts until it came out the other side; to find, somewhat naturally, that there was almost no cheese left. But I am getting off the point. Of course I have often yearned to finish with the cheese, particularly when, during the long months of our married life, I have despaired of Juliette ever changing from a grasshopper into an ant, but. . . . Yes, this is what I wanted to say: I've just remembered that it's rising twenty-three months since she dragged me before the Mayor, and somehow I have the impression that it was yesterday. How quickly time passes when it is well filled – with worries, quarrels and attempted poisonings. Even now I'm shirking the issue. The dangers of saying what I really want to say are so enormous. I mean . . .

could it possibly be that the time sped by so swiftly because I was happy?

* * *

At the start I installed Juliette in my bachelor flat. Perhaps installed isn't the right word, and I should say rather that I made her free of it. It was, I believe M. Belhomme who opened the door to Juliette. She had such a staggering effect upon him that after only the briefest delay he went mad – wholly, certifiably mad.

M. Belhomme was my proprietor, or to be more exact he was the proprietor of a small house, the ground and first floors of which he occupied himself while he rented me the second. This consisted of two attics, ravishingly furnished in the Directoire style, and a Napoleon III bathroom.

He was a bachelor, and what is more he disliked women (after all, one of them eventually deprived him of his reason). He had agreed to have me as a tenant because he had grounds for believing that I, too, appreciated celibacy (for reasons contrary to his, but no less valid).

M. Belhomme was the only child (unique in other ways as well) of a general and his wife. They had both been recalled to Abraham's bosom, not prematurely, yet before they had been able to persuade their well-connected families to make suitable provision for their elderly orphan. The general and his wife were survivors of the days when good manners, a pedigree and an impeccable accent were the main requirements in a diplomat, and when Philip was a young man – he was one of those men who go on being a young man – he had believed that a post as an attaché in an embassy was therefore his due. The suspicion that more vulgar but no less useful virtues were desirable did not dawn on him until he had reached an age which in most people is known as mature but which, in his case, was little short of senile.



Monsieur Belhomme

He now devoted his life to the Government of the Interior: and it was a whole-time job. M. Belhomme, being unable to bear the presence of a woman, even of a housemaid, beat his carpets, polished his silver and pulled his curtains back and forth to perfection. Occasionally he hurried off on a mission to his grocer, but he preferred to place his orders by telephone, over which he explained his wants in a voice pitched in such a high key that it made, at any rate when a man was present, a very cracked, pathetic sound. To judge from the intoxicating smells which rose from his stove he was a wonderful cook. He had clean hands and an ear for music.

I had intended to hold him up as a model to Juliette, but when it became apparent she would only reply with insults I took it upon myself to teach my wife the art of housekeeping. I don't know to whom or to what I owe my lack of success in this endeavour. She has suggested, and sometimes with vehemence, that I didn't know the first thing about it myself, and yet when I was alone in my bachelor flat, everything went swimmingly.

I had two rooms – in one my writing table and my books, in the other my bed. I pulled up the bedclothes every day, and once a week the concierge from the house next door came and turned the mattress and swept a bit here and there. She dusted the chairs, except for those on which there were papers. I had forbidden her to touch these, and as I needed a lot of chairs to take my papers the housework was done in about an hour. As for the plates and dishes, they consisted of a bowl which I washed out every morning under the tap before pouring in my coffee.

The life of a man, as can be seen, is a very simple thing to organize. Logically, the introduction of a woman into the scheme of things should merely multiply the work of the house by two; not even that as she sleeps in the same bed . . . but let's not quibble over details. Let's say that it should

have taken Juliette two hours a week . . . or should it ? After all, the floor space to be swept hadn't doubled itself – on the contrary – and I hadn't installed a single new piece of furniture for the simple reason that there wasn't room for it to get in. I know I no longer took my meals in a restaurant, but isn't that the least one expects when one marries ? As soon as my paper made me a special correspondent I dispensed with regular attendance at the office which, at the dawn of our love, had cost me so many noonday sandwiches. But I was not exacting. I had advised her to renounce chicken galantine.

'I can perfectly see,' I said to her, 'that it isn't feasible if one hasn't a kitchen.'

All the same, I had a vague idea of what could be done, whereas Juliette hadn't. Otherwise she wouldn't have agreed to cook for me on the electric hot-plate in the bathroom. It did not take me very long to appreciate this fact.

'This beefsteak with sauté potatoes,' I announced one day, pushing back my plate, 'doesn't seem quite as successful as the one we had yesterday. Still I must admit that yesterday's beefsteak and sauté potatoes were very much better than the beefsteak and sauté potatoes of the day before. I would hazard a guess that we've had fifteen beefsteaks and sauté potatoes in fifteen days and that if it's supposed to be a joke it's probably a very tasty one, but if it's supposed to be a lunch . . .'

Juliette interrupted to inform me that I had a nerve.

'What do you expect me to do,' she asked me, 'on a microscopic heater ?'

I hadn't the faintest idea and I felt the ground slipping.

'Ask Belhomme,' I answered.

'He's got a kitchen ! Which in itself is a scandal anyway !'

'And also he's an expert.'

'All right, you asked for it,' said Juliette.

She threw her napkin in the direction of my face and clat-

tered down the stairs from our attic to the ground floor. I clattered after her shouting to her to stop. But she had already knocked on my confirmed bachelor's door. He was enjoying an *escalope à la crème*. At the sight of those little mushrooms I felt an urge to commit murder.

He got up, displaying the elegant drapery of a midnight blue dressing-gown. Juliette dug up her most worldly smile.

'Please don't get up,' she said, 'or else we shall think we're disturbing you.'

There was a momentary hesitation, but M. Belhomme remained standing, trembling with suppressed rage, his face like white wood.

'I've come,' she continued graciously, 'because I've decided you're going to show me how I can cook a lovely little *escalope* like that on a hot-plate in a bathroom.'

M. Belhomme stared at the wall behind Juliette and pretended not to have noticed her. Juliette took stock of her enemy and added negligently:

'My husband, you see, has so often praised your feminine qualities.'

Slowly, as if handicapped by some mechanical difficulty, he turned his head towards me. I thought at last he was going to say something, but no; he merely offered me a look full of reproachful melancholy.

'My husband seems to think,' continued Juliette obstinately, 'that these qualities would be more useful to me than to you. Personally, I think you ought to rent us your kitchen.'

This was an admirable idea of course, but Juliette could usually express herself with more tact. I still ask myself to this day whether she was really carried away by a sense of injustice or whether, on the contrary, she hoped for nothing so much as to be refused entry into the kitchen. Perhaps the whole scene was designed as an alibi for the beefsteaks and *sauté* potatoes. Perhaps even, it was designed for nothing but the

pleasure of despising a gentleman who didn't appreciate women; or even, maybe, it was a scene for the pure love of making a scene.

'Perhaps we two men could get together and settle this little matter of the kitchen,' I suggested.

M. Belhomme gave signs of distress. His eye blinked, his lip trembled, he spoke.

'Nothing' can be settled,' he said, 'as long as that lady is living under my roof.'

I took a step forward – only one, but a firm one. 'That lady, as you call her, happens to be my wife.'

M. Belhomme looked at me pityingly and said, simply: 'Alas!'

'I'd break your neck,' I said, 'if I didn't think you were unbalanced.'

He passed a hand through his grey hair, looked at himself in the glass, threw back his head.

'You're quite right,' he murmured, 'I am a little mad. Perhaps I shall marry one day . . .'

When we had reached the first floor he was still cackling with laughter. This was too much for Juliette. She sped down the stairs again like a meteor.

'Forgive me for interrupting you,' she said sweetly, 'but don't forget to switch the telephone through.'

I heard a sort of roar. She gently shut the door and rejoined me.

'Darling,' she asked, taking my arm, 'am I honestly as unbearable as all that?'

She had a ferocious look on her face which I thought charming.

'In my opinion,' I replied with sincerity, 'he exaggerates.'

'I'll teach him what a woman is,' said Juliette.

* * *

Juliette had an illness – telephonitis. M. Belhomme suffered severely because of it as our two telephones were on the same line. I also suffered. I was always getting into trouble with my newspaper because my editor had tried in vain to reach me while my wife sat on the line talking to her friends. One night, round about midnight, one of these delightful scatter-brains rang her up. The normal course of action when the telephone rang was as follows. Juliette would jump up, the book she found so convenient to dream over while I was working sliding off her knees; then she would knock over the chairs she found in her path. She would lift up the receiver – sometimes at this moment a pile of books crashed to the floor – and at last would say, ‘Hullo’. Then she would exclaim: ‘What a fool, no, but what an abysmal fool,’ and go on repeating it until M. Belhomme on the floor below had answered the telephone, discovered the call was not for him, replaced the receiver and manoeuvred the contraption which gave us the line. During this time Juliette told him what a fool he was at least ten times, which news, even if he suspected it, he couldn’t as a matter of fact, hear.

At last Juliette would get her line, and the litany of ‘fools’ would fall directly upon the ear of the caller, who formed a false opinion of my intellectual capacity, believing she had been overhearing a conjugal conversation. After which Juliette would start talking and I had nothing to do but wait, sucking my pen, for her to finish.

One night then, when the telephone had again woken up M. Belhomme, a friend of hers offered some sensational news. On dialling INF 1 she had got mixed up in a general conversation between subscribers who had, like her, dialled INF in order to get some INF. I have not been initiated into the mysteries of the automatic telephone, but it seems to be a fact that when the Paris Information service closes down for the night, subscribers may find themselves linked together on

INF 1. 'No, it's not possible! You're sure? No? No! Let's try. Meet you again in a moment then!' For once the communication had been brief. However it was taken up again immediately on INF 1.

The system had evidently functioned for a long time. One felt oneself among habitués, though invisible ones, and it was rather startling to enter into this ghostly salon peopled with voluble spirits. Strangers doubly hidden under pseudonyms let their hair down until it swept the gutters. Henri IV courted Joan of Arc, Napoleon and Casanova compared exploits in a medley of muddy confessions and repressed dreams. Masked, concupiscence spoke most eloquently. From time to time a voice intervened, cutting into an intimate conversation, and this suggested that there were hundreds of people clustered hopefully on the lines like listeners at key-holes.

Juliette put her hand over the mouthpiece. 'It's disgusting,' she told me in a low voice. And added: 'But it's very entertaining.' And she went on listening. Anything that takes her off the beaten track appeals enormously to Juliette.

'This is Dame Toqué . . .' It is Juliette speaking. 'I've a heavenly husband . . . can you hear me, Henri IV? He'd bring me flowers every night if he didn't so dote on being original. I'm always expecting him to bring me flowers, but he loves doing the unexpected, and so, you see, he hardly ever brings them.'

'A husband,' says Henri IV, 'is a discerning creature!'

'And then, you know, he has a wonderful sense of humour. The proof is that lately he's taken to reading funny books when he has nothing else to do.'

'Mine too,' interpolates Joan of Arc.

'And do you know what he thinks? He thinks that love is the "marriage of true minds". Absolutely. Still, he's very loving: he once told me, when we were engaged, that he

loved me and that I could consider that as an established fact unless he informed me to the contrary.'

'Tomorrow, seven o'clock, at the Muette Métro,' coos Henri IV. 'It won't be anything like that, I promise you.'

'Thank you very much,' says Juliette. '. . . Oh, and he gives a squeal if I kiss the back of his neck when he's working. Do you mind . . .'

'Go on,' I said, 'you interest me.'

I slammed the door behind me and went to cool my rage under the chestnuts at Ranelagh. There was something in what she was getting at, of course – I wouldn't have disliked a bit more glamour in life myself. But there are other things to consider besides romance. I didn't dare believe that this scandalous public confession had more in it than she had wanted to tell me or than I had wanted to hear; that it might be a sign of some deeper discord which needed a lot of love and generosity for its solution. I was still at this stage trying to take a reasonable line which Juliette, being argumentative, detested.

'You attach too much importance to dreary details,' she had said to me. But if I didn't, who would, seeing that she despised them? And yet they always revenged themselves – on me for preference. There were the beefsteaks, for instance. I decided that I would say to her . . . m'm . . . would say to her: 'If you don't attach importance to details the details attach it to themselves.' There. Under the Ranelagh chestnuts I had rationalized our quarrel. I returned home pacified, to explain to her that sensitiveness, imagination and passion demanded from time to time a change from sauté to fried potatoes.

She didn't understand me as well as I hoped, and returned to her new toy, INF 1, which had served to specify the nature of our misunderstanding without exactly clarifying it. I

began to think it would take years, perhaps all our lives, to dissipate the mists – or for them to swallow us?

Yet, by a complicated detour, INF I was going to enable us to lease M. Belhomme's establishment, and there my wife would have a golden opportunity for spreading her domestic wings. After all, I had to admit that I hadn't, in my bachelor flat, offered Juliette the most favourable conditions in which to exercise her still well-concealed gifts for being a mistress of a house.

* * *

Our bachelor's first 'crise' occurred when I was away in Berlin. Juliette and I had never, until then, been apart. I went off on a reporting job for five days, returned after two weeks and arrived at about the same time as my letters announcing my delay. I landed into high tragedy. Still, it really wasn't my fault that Germany and her postal system hadn't yet risen from their ruins.

When I strolled down the blind streets of that immense devastated city our two rooms in la Muette, tiny as they were, seemed to me to be the most felicitous spots in the world. Here and there a window filled in with boards showed that a troglodyte had returned to what the fire had spared. With my elbows on the bar of the Hotel am Zoo, one of the few luxury hotels still intact, where the British Press was installed, I contemplated from above the crowd of hungry wolves in the Kurfurstendamm, the wan girls who followed a man, into his bed if needs be, for a few cigarettes – a fortune. Among these unhappy faces Juliette's face had accompanied me. I had called her one night to tell her so. Of course our number was engaged, and knowing myself and my natural masculine shyness, there was a good chance of my never telling her so again. I got home after thirty-six hours in the train, bursting with joy at the thought of seeing her and at the joy she

would have on seeing me. I turned the key in the lock.

'How you dare . . . !' said Juliette.

She put down the telephone and burst into sobs. She was in bed. I stood there, transfixed, my kisses frozen on my lips.

'Swear to me . . . swear to me you'll never do this again!'

'Do what again?'

'This . . .'

She took my letters from under her pillow and threw them on the bedspread.

'Fifteen days without news . . . how could you!'

'But . . . those letters; I wrote them, didn't I?'

'Yesterday! They all arrived yesterday!'

'But didn't you look at the dates?'

'I've told you, they all came yesterday.'

'Then that's all right,' I said, seating myself on the bed.

'There's nothing to argue about.'

And we began to argue. At the end of half an hour she cried:

'And you haven't even kissed me!'

And she burst into tears again.

'What makes you think I want to . . . ?'

She raised herself up on her fists. 'You admit it! Then this really is the end!'

There followed several minutes of muffled moaning which I endured with growing irritation. At last she stammered:

'How many times?'

'How many times what?'

'How many times have you been unfaithful to me?'

I recalled the sly eyes of a Berliner which had tempted me, and those girls who offered themselves so eagerly to 'occupiers'. I had refused them all because of Juliette. I repressed my rage and said, as gently as I could manage, putting my hand on her shoulder:

'I haven't been unfaithful to you.'

'It's true? It's really true?'

She obviously longed distractedly to believe me and had only wanted my word for it. And because it was so easy to convince her I began to think I'd been a bit of an ass to deny myself. But after only a minute she cried:

'How do you expect me to believe you? I know what you're thinking, I can feel it. . . . You're vile!'

I was too, though not in quite the way she imagined. I endeavoured with much patient effort to persuade her of my faithfulness. In vain. She no longer wanted to believe me. And so I returned by a different route to the same thought: I'd been an ass to deny myself. I gave up. I left her to her tears. Something deep inside me whispered that these exasperating outbursts of hers were a form of love – men are not as obtuse as they look – but I was only conscious of the exasperation. 'Take her in your arms,' I said to myself. But I knew if I did so I should throw her out of the window. Suddenly I heard:

'And to think I was very nearly murdered!'

'Look, darling,' I said, 'I've been travelling for thirty-six hours, it's late, I'm tired . . . don't you think we could call it a day?'

Juliette's reactions are sometimes – indeed often – highly theatrical. She no longer wept. She put a hand to her throat and said in a hoarse whisper:

'That man tried to strangle me, and you talk about sleep?'
I no longer talked about sleep.

It sounded like Grand Guignol. It all took place amid the horrors of a dark and dreadful night. Juliette was amusing herself nicely on INF 1, when an intriguing conversation was abruptly interrupted. There was a dead silence. M. Belhomme had evidently twiddled his handle. Seized with justifiable rage Juliette leaped out of bed, put on her dressing-gown, and ran downstairs to drum on the bachelor's door

crying: 'Telephone! telephone!' No reply. Juliette drummed louder and again yelled, 'telephone! telephone!' Eventually M. Belhomme opened the door on to the stairs and said with infuriating calmness: 'I am telephoning.' 'And I,' said Juliette, 'can no longer tele . . .' He had shut the door in her face. Such caddishness deprived her of her voice. She returned upstairs and tried to curb her impatience by lifting up the receiver, putting it to her ear, putting it back and beginning all over again. But her hopes of getting the line restored to her remained thwarted. And all this time they were chatting on INF 1 . . . without her! She realized suddenly that this was something she definitely would not tolerate.

'I went downstairs again to ask him whether he had the intention of monopolizing the telephone all night. It was at least one o'clock in the morning: is that an hour to be telephoning? Don't interrupt - I'm different. He came out like a madman, a real madman - if you'd seen him! I ran away and he pursued me up the stairs. I tried to shut the door but he wedged it open with his foot and he had no difficulty in pushing me out of the way. He was deathly white, and he had foam on his lips . . . oh, darling! He advanced on me . . . oh well . . . towards me then! his two hands held out in front of him, trembling, with fingers stretched out towards my neck . . . and the most terrible thing of all, you see, was that I couldn't scream.'

'These sorts of things happen in nightmares,' I observed. 'Are you quite sure . . . ?'

Juliette could scream now, and she proved it.

'Well, well,' I said, 'and what then? He evidently didn't strangle you, since you're telling the tale.'

It appeared I was a barbarian. As for M. Belhomme's hands, they had fallen back to pluck at the telephone wire which they had feverishly torn from its mooring.

'Afterwards,' said Juliette, 'it was as though he didn't know

where he was. It was uncanny. He just looked at me with a demented look . . . one might say he looked at me with the whites of his eyes, if you get my meaning.'

I assured Juliette I got her meaning by patting her knee.

'And then he put a hand in front of his eyes and gave a long howl . . . like a dog baying at the moon . . . and suddenly he turned round, hugging his dressing-gown to him . . .'

'And reeled . . .' I said.

'Yes,' said Juliette. 'How did you know?'

'And so you double locked the door and you telephoned the police only the telephone was cut.'

'As you seem to know everything,' said Juliette, vexed, 'I won't tire myself any more.'

'It was you yourself who . . .'

'Don't interrupt all the time.'

'And then?'

'Then, that's all. You don't think it's enough?'

'Oh yes,' I said, 'it's amply enough. I merely thought you had some more to tell me as you said not to interrupt. But certainly I think it's enough.'

She gave a bound in bed.

'Ah, you do, do you? And I suppose I'm meant to be grateful for that! Anyway I've told him . . .'

'Oh! So you've talked together since?'

'Certainly not! I slipped a note under his door, telling him that unless he repaired the depredations – that's the word, isn't it? – immediately, you would, on your return, go and knock his head off.'

'You did well,' I said stalwartly.

I lifted the receiver, listened to the dialling tone, and observed happily:

'The telephone is working perfectly.'

'What if it is?' said Juliette. 'And now, off you go.'

'Where to?'

'To knock his head off.'

'At this hour?'

I tried to point out to her that she would be breaking her word, and even more serious, her promise.

'What are you talking about?' said Juliette. 'I promised him you'd knock his head off if the telephone wasn't mended.'

'Exactly. It is!'

'Yes, I know it is! But I didn't promise that you wouldn't knock his head off if the telephone *was* mended. Do you understand?'

I held my head in my two hands and made a powerful effort. But I was too desperately sleepy to unravel the sophism at the heart of her argument. All I saw was that a reproof must be administered to the gentleman below, for the good of his soul. I didn't blame him, I almost sympathized. Juliette was exasperating.

I threw off my clothes and stretched myself beside her. At once she seemed more charming. Exasperating too, of course, Belhomme was right. But it was for me to say so, not him. Why? Just because, that's all.

'You know,' I murmured, 'I telephoned you from Berlin. I wanted to tell you I loved you.'

A man always gets what he deserves. I had Juliette. M. Belhomme would have my fist in his face. Tomorrow.

CHAPTER SIX

If You Want Something Done Well . . .

'A STRAIGHT left – *wham* – on the point of the jaw – that's what the brute deserves, of course. But one can't be too brutal. No, I won't knock him out cold. I'll shut the door and slap him in the kisser, with an airy wave of the hand. No need to say a word, the swine will understand.'

This was how I goaded myself into an appropriate mood on my way down to see M. Belhomme, and I must say it sounded strikingly to the point.

• But what did I do in fact?

'I would be obliged, Belhomme,' I announced, leaning my elbow on his mantelpiece, 'I would be obliged if you would give me some adequate reason for your unworthy behaviour.'

It wasn't that I lacked resolution, but I am too civilized to knock a man's head off without a preliminary parley. It suddenly seemed important definitely to establish the fact that M. Belhomme was in the wrong. No doubt he would deny it and that would be just too bad for him.

M. Belhomme stood stock still. His eyes were unwaveringly pathetic, but his chin, in perfect range for a right hook, trembled invitingly. Suddenly he flopped into an armchair, which wasn't at all what I intended.

'Unspeakable bounder!' he muttered.

'No really, that's a bit too thick!' I said. 'So you're going to insult me now, are you? Get up!'

Like an archbishop, he raised a deprecatory hand. 'You misunderstand me,' he said, 'I was speaking of myself . . .'

This wasn't sticking to my scenario at all, and I just stood there, off balance, with my mouth slightly open.

'Oh well, if that's the way you feel,' I said at last, 'let's just settle for your being a drip and forget it.'

'Ah yes,' he sighed, 'a drip, yes. And a very sad drip too.' He continued vehemently: 'How I hate them! It is they who made me . . . like this! When I was twelve they sent me to a school in Switzerland on the pretext that I needed special care. They wanted to spend their winters quietly at Nice, at the Negresco. Yes, my father had already retired. For I am the child of old parents . . .'

'That is pretty obvious,' I said peevishly.

He continued in his plaintive falsetto, and I listened, though I was furious with myself for doing so.

'Afterwards, they shut me up in a flat in Geneva, without friends, without relations. Just imagine, I had to argue with them for months before they agreed to pay for my golf lessons! And yet they were always saying they wanted me to go into the Diplomatic! Into a padded cell, more likely! It was then that everyone started to ostracize me, to run away from me. They knew, you see.'

'What did they know?' I asked.

He brushed my question aside with the back of his hand: 'They *knew*.'

'Now look,' I said, 'you've got everything to make you happy. You're rich, you're not old, you love music and books, you can travel if you feel like it, there's nothing in the world to prevent you doing anything . . .'

One word more and I would have suggested that we changed places, but though I was no longer at all sure why Juliette had sent me down, certainly it wasn't for that.

'No,' he echoed in a low voice, 'nothing in the world prevents me from doing anything . . . nothing . . . and nobody. Alas!'

That 'alas' induced a tingling sensation in the palms of my hands which reminded me of the purpose of my visit.

'You,' he continued, 'you could understand me . . . you . . .'

'It would surprise me enormously if I could,' I said dryly.

But he was too busy being melancholy to hear me.

'Girls ran away from me too, like all the others,' he continued. 'I was branded by Fate! I still am branded! Can't you see the dreadful signs? I am alone, alone! I have never known the sweetness of a woman, the shackles which bind one to a beloved, the quarrels which quicken desire . . . how marvellous it must be to be reconciled and how marvellous to hurt each other! When one is in love, everything about a woman is marvellous, isn't it?'

He *was* a drip and no mistake.

I stammered encouragement on the lines that women had, at times, been known to be less than perfect, and then I ran upstairs again to our floor, where Juliette was eagerly awaiting the results of this sporting fixture.

'You scrubbed the floor with him I hope?' she said.

'And polished it,' I answered.

'It didn't make much noise,' she said, 'but it certainly took a long time. You didn't get hurt, darling?'

'He didn't even touch me.'

'If he'd dared to touch you,' she said, 'I believe I would have killed him.'

'Listen,' I began, 'he couldn't . . .'

'I was sure he couldn't,' she cut in proudly. 'He wouldn't be able to.'

I am not overfond of lying to Juliette. However, I postponed explaining to her just why M. Belhomme hadn't touched me.

* * *

In the interval, a doubt stole into my mind; supposing he wasn't such a poor fish as he pretended, supposing he had,

with the courage of despair, been acting so as to avoid getting his face damaged?

Uncertainty about this still annoys me, and it will go on annoying me for a very long time, as M. Belhomme took his secret away in a police car and had it locked up with him in a nursing home.

The first symptoms did not strike us as being particularly disquieting. We noticed that every time a bell rang, and I rushed to the window, there was nobody there. Perhaps you haven't quite grasped why I rushed to the window every time a bell rang. It's very simple. M. Belhomme was bent on keeping the front door shut and I was bent on not going downstairs to open it. When friends came to see us I threw the key out to them into the garden. When these rings began echoing through the house at mealtimes they put us into what amounted to a slight panic, understandable when one considers Juliette and her little hot-plate in the bathroom. That's why I was always racing to the window. After an implausible number of these upheavals we sat down and tried to review the situation in a reasonable light. Rings on the bell . . . nobody at the door. . . what could it mean?

It meant, as a matter of fact, that M. Belhomme was ringing for his servants. As he had none, he would rise from the table, steer himself into the kitchen and return with the *entrecôte*. He also rang for himself to bring in the cheese and upbraided himself if it was not cut according to the rules. On the whole, however, he was satisfied with the service and didn't complain much. And, fascinated, neither did we.

And then one day his household went on strike. He forgot to answer his bell. He rang and rang and, seeing that he was in the dining-room, nobody moved in the kitchen. I heard him shouting and I went out onto our landing, Juliette close behind me.

'If this goes on,' whispered Juliette, 'he'll give himself

the sack and we shall have the whole house to ourselves.'

I walked down a few stairs. She whispered: 'Can you understand what he's saying?'

'He's shouting "Fermin! Ernestine! Célénie! Can't you hear I'm ringing for you? I've rung. I rang! I am still ringing!"'

I stretched my ears. 'Now he's shouting "Answer it! It's ringing! Telephone! Te-le-phone! It's that little bitch again!"'

'Do you think,' said Juliette, 'he means me?'

'I'm very much afraid so,' I murmured.

'No really!' said Juliette, pushing in front of me and cantering down the stairs two at a time. I ought to have held on to her, but I must admit I adore drama.

M. Belhomme was now engaged in sacking his entire staff in words more suited to a cavalry sergeant-major. As I stood gargling irresolutely behind his dining-room door, Juliette suddenly appeared from the kitchen carrying, in a spirited manner, a lovely little lobster. It was *à l'américaine*.

'Open the door,' she ordered me.

I opened the door and followed her in (to avert accidents and, of course, not to miss a trick). M. Belhomme's flow of invective stopped dead and he looked at Juliette as though he had never seen her before. She reached the table and handed him the dish.

'You rang for me I think?' she said sweetly.

Fiercely he pushed the dish away. 'Why haven't you cut up this lobster properly?' he shouted. 'You're fired!' Then, in the same tone: 'You! So it's you! I'm not a bit surprised. I've always thought you were an incompetent booby! Get out! Get out I say!' he bellowed.

Seizing the lobster in his hand he stood up. Juliette dropped the dish and fled, pursued by M. Belhomme. I held out my arms and he braked sharply. Then he swung his arm

in a wide curve and sent the lobster flying towards a large picture. It split the canvas and remained there, suspended in the beard of an elderly judge, like a rabbit in a retriever's mouth. Such messiness from so tidy a man should have warned me that we were passing from burlesque into melodrama. And indeed, having made a *volte face* he charged down on a mahogany console table, tore open a drawer . . . and when he turned round again he held in his hand a small object, prettily encrusted with mother-of-pearl, which looked deplorably like a revolver.

There was nothing for me to do but to take cover with all possible speed. But then I thought that if I squatted down behind a chair he would take me for a burglar. So I steadied my voice as best I could.

'Don't be a bloody fool!' I said with it.

It still lacked authority. I swallowed my saliva and began again.

'Don't be a fool!'

He came towards me. He lifted the revolver. His bulging eyes seemed not to see me, which I thought the greatest possible pity. There was a prodigious burst of laughter and, as the shot went off, I hurled myself onto all fours. Then the laughter, blocked by his suddenly clenched teeth, changed into groans. I peered cautiously through the legs of the chair. The revolver was on the carpet. Belhomme had retreated to the table, which he now clutched, his head tilted backwards, face to the ceiling. Like a siren the groaning trailed off to a plaintive wail. M. Belhomme began to oscillate, his nails scratching the mahogany, and then he fell full length onto the floor.

In the deep silence which followed I could hear Juliette's anguished voice on the stairs. I didn't answer her because I was much too occupied trying to talk myself into believing he wasn't dead. 'It's an epileptic fit,' I said to myself consolingly.

But I waited in vain for the epileptic's convulsions. I longed for them but didn't want Juliette to see them.

A strident cry came from the staircase: 'Jean!'

'You can come down now,' I told her.

His heart was beating.

She ran in to be greeted with a large body extended on the carpet. The revolver lay behind me.

'Then you *have* killed him!' she breathed aghast.

'Don't be silly!' I said. 'He fired the shot.'

'But,' observed Juliette judiciously, '*he* is on his back.'

'It's just nervous prostration.'

Juliette reflected for a moment. 'Even so,' she said, 'don't you think we ought to do something about it?'

'Of course,' I said. 'He's probably fainted, nothing more.'

We were a little vague as to remedies.

'Slaps?' asked Juliette. I undertook to smack his cheeks.

'Harder than that,' said Juliette.

She took a napkin off the table and poured a jug of water over it. 'Move over,' she said.

Right cheek, left cheek, on she went, slapping him at a good round pace.

'It's not doing a thing for him,' I observed.

'No,' she said with a sweet smile, 'but it is for me.'

She tossed back a straying lock of hair.

'This isn't getting him anywhere,' I repeated.

'Then we must call the police,' she said.

'Are you mad?'

'Why? It's their job. Don't forget he tried to murder you. He might start all over again if we revived him. And not only that but there's also the risk he may die on us!'

She went upstairs to telephone while I stayed beside M. Belhomme. And I began to be sorry for him. I would soon be seeing him again as a menace, but in the meantime he looked awfully pathetic.

I glanced about me. The ancestor still wore his lobster bib, but now he had a slightly blackguardedly air. I noticed it was a small hole above his eye which gave him such a rakish appearance.

Juliette returned.

'Look,' I said, 'he fired at the founder of the family.'

'So he did,' said Juliette. 'But . . . I thought he fired at you?'

If forced, she would probably have admitted it wasn't my fault that I hadn't been fired at, but all the same I felt I had sunk lower in her estimation.

* * *

Juliette lay in wait in the garden. She shouted: 'Here they are at last!'

I went out to greet them. There were at least a dozen, climbing out of their van with every sign of boredom. I politely saluted the sergeant and began to give him a recital of recent happenings while he admired the flower beds.

'If you'll follow me,' I said, 'it's this way.'

He went on ahead.

'Which way?' he asked.

'The door on the left.'

It was shut. I turned the handle.

'It's shut,' he said. His voice didn't sound in the least pleased. He bent over the lock. 'It isn't locked,' he added, looking at me with a look which said 'and all the better for you, my lad, that it isn't'.

I was particularly keen on not being suspected of murder. 'So?' I said, in the hope he would more clearly elucidate his thoughts.

'He must have recovered all by himself, and then bolted the door.'

'What a dirty trick!' cried Juliette.

'I don't want you to think,' I said, 'that I brought you here for nothing. He wasn't a bit well, I can assure you.'

'*And he had a revolver,*' said Juliette.

'He's in his own home,' said the policeman hesitantly.

'Supposing you forced the door?' I suggested.

'Can't be done. Breaking into a private residence. Against the law,' replied the sergeant briefly. He hesitated, then he shouted: 'Open up!'

We waited. He shouted once again 'Open up!' and a faint reply came to us through the door.

'... me in peace! ... go to hell!'

'There, you see,' kindly translated a constable, 'he doesn't want to open up.'

'I'm sorry,' said the sergeant, 'but he hasn't done anything which falls foul of the law as far as I can see.' He saluted. 'Good afternoon.'

Juliette choked. 'We will call you,' she said, 'when he has killed us.'

* * *

We went up to our floor. I gave two turns to the key of the landing door and Juliette remarked: 'That won't do any good. He's certainly got another key.'

I tried to make her see that by leaving the key in the lock we had a good chance of . . .

'Thank you!' she said. 'You will kindly oblige me . . .

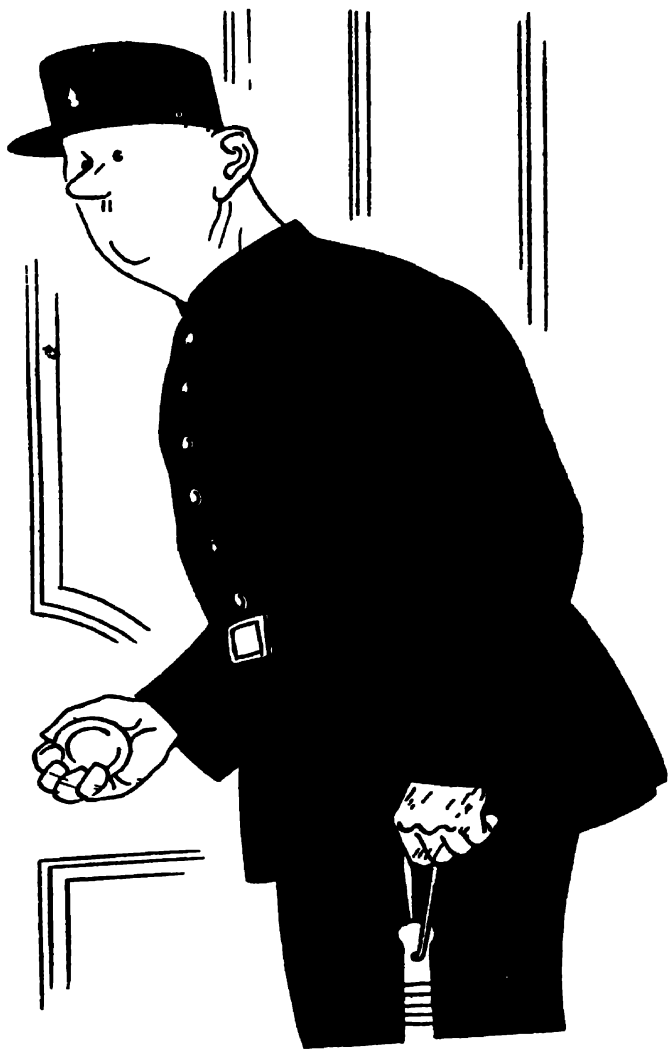
'No doubt,' I interrupted, 'that is what you hope. But you can't count on me obliging you today.'

'Do as I say,' ordered Juliette. 'There's no one in the world as clever as a madman.'

'I'm happy to learn,' I replied, 'that you, at any rate, are not in the least mad.'

'And I'm sorry to learn that you're nothing but a fat-head.'

Conversation was, without a doubt, getting a bitter-sweet



‘Open up!’

edge to it. So I apologized. 'I'm sorry,' I said, 'but I'm a bit nervy. I'll certainly do what you want but as you haven't told me what it is, how can I?'

'We're going to push the wardrobe against the door,' said Juliette.

'We means me, I suppose,' I said. 'Well, *we* refuse. Incidentally, it would make going out extremely impractical.'

'But do you imagine we're going to go out? Just to get assassinated? Never!'

'Never!'

'Never!'

'Well then, in that case,' I said, 'let us make love, oh my fairest Juliette, while there is yet time, and let us die locked in each other's arms, of hunger.'

'By the way, are you hungry?' asked Juliette.

'Aren't you?'

'Yes, oh yes!'

'Then let's eat.'

'The only thing against eating,' said Juliette, 'is that I haven't yet done my shopping . . .'

'You mean to tell me,' I remonstrated, 'that I'm not going to have my beefsteak and sauté potatoes today?'

I could have my sauté potatoes, but the beefsteak was still at the butcher's.

'Of course, there's always the lobster,' I remarked. She yelped. 'There, there, I don't insist - I just thought it might allay our hunger.'

'What a fool I am!' cried Juliette. 'I've only got to telephone to the butcher.'

She took off the receiver and I saw her grow pale.

'He's got our line,' she breathed, 'we're at his mercy.'

'But no, darling! How you do exaggerate. If he's telephoning he must be feeling much calmer. Haven't you got some sardines?'

Juliette didn't move. 'He's coming up . . .' she said suddenly. 'I can hear him!'

We ran on tip-toe to glue our ears to the landing door. He was, indeed, heavily climbing the stairs; we could hear him breathing.

'Oh!' moaned Juliette, 'if only you'd moved the wardrobe! He'll smash in this door with one blow of his shoulder!'

I put my back to the door panel and leaned on it with all my weight, so energetically indeed that my feet skidded and I found myself on my behind. Juliette, galvanized into action by fear, brought a chair and wedged it against the shelves of the bookcase. I wedged my feet against it. I couldn't slip any more and my pressure on the door must have been considerable as by this time I was very nearly horizontal.

Juliette panted. So did I.

'I believe,' I said, 'that he's stopped on the first floor. He's probably gone into his bedroom.'

'Ah!' sighed Juliette, 'do you really think so? I thought so too, but I wasn't quite sure.'

Her face relaxed. My body did the same, and once again I was sitting on the floor.

'If you brought me some sardines,' I said, 'I could easily eat them here. After all, it isn't too uncomfortable.'

So we had a little picnic on the floorboards.

'Like this,' said Juliette, 'we shall hear him if he moves.'

'And if he doesn't move?'

'If he doesn't move?' echoed Juliette.

'Perhaps someone, some day, will find our skeletons behind this door.'

'Let's hope so,' said Juliette philosophically.

'Your sardines have one tremendous virtue,' I observed. 'They bear absolutely no resemblance to your beefsteak with sauté . . .'

He had moved. The furniture in his bedroom had also

moved. The chest-of-drawers must have crossed the room like a boomerang unless, of course, it was a cupboard on skates. It shook the floor above like a jelly.

'That's done it!' said Juliette. 'He's killed himself.'

I was just going to remind her that the dead don't usually make so much noise when we heard the police van draw up with a rush.

'The police!' said Juliette. 'What wonderful timing!'

'There's something shady about this,' I replied.

The policemen raced up the stairs. I heard Belhomme opening his bedroom door to them, but already they were knocking on ours. It was the sergeant of our morning visit.

'Where is the body?' he said.

'What body?' asked Juliette.

'Yours,' said the sergeant. Then he scratched his head ruminatively. 'He telephoned to say he'd shot you dead with a revolver. My men are arresting him now.'

'He's even madder than I thought,' I said.

'Looks like it,' said the sergeant. 'You're sure there isn't another woman in the house?'

'Don't you think,' I said to him, 'that one's enough?'

He gave a good-natured smile. 'All the same I must search.'

He searched and then we accompanied him downstairs. Two policemen were in charge of Belhomme, who was holding out his arms like a sleepwalker on the movies, pleading to be handcuffed. His wrists were pink and there was dried blood on them. The minute he saw Juliette he gave a roar and tried to rush towards her. The policemen seized his arms, which fell limply to his sides.

'She has been resurrected . . .' he whispered. Suddenly he yelled out: 'Gentlemen, woman is eternal! And,' he added in a voice like a penny rattle, 'and infernal!'

It was the first sensible thing I had ever heard him say and yet it was this remark which cost him his freedom. A few

hours later he was shut up in a home for well-to-do lunatics.

When he had gone I went up into his room with the sergeant. In the bathroom we found a Gillette razor blade and some trails of blood. After his imaginary murder he had tried to cut his wrists, evidently before calling the police as there was blood on the telephone. There were also a few spots on the carpet, in spite of the fact that our tidy bachelor had carefully gone into the bathroom to open his veins. I wonder why we thought it funny.

'It was you who drove him mad,' I told Juliette. 'Simply because you were a woman.'

That also made me laugh a lot. I was mistaken though. I didn't know what she had in store for me.

* * *

As soon as the psychiatrists announced that M. Belhomme would certainly finish his days in an asylum, the members of his family arrived on the scene. They shed a token tear – poor Philippe had always been a little out of the ordinary – and began to make an inventory.

'I prefer that to crocodile's tears,' stated Juliette, 'but I must say I'm beginning to be sorry for the poor thing.'

And sure enough in a couple of days I could see that she was now in the grip of heart-rending remorse. There was no denying her exaggeration this time. She refused to remember that this lunatic could have killed us. She even went so far as to forget he'd cut off the telephone.

'And yet,' I pointed out, 'now we might be able to rent the whole house.'

She looked shocked. 'The idea!' she cried. Then added: 'Couldn't you have thought of it sooner?'

'I did think of it sooner,' I said, 'but seeing you were so full of remorse I was afraid you'd think me a little hard, even a bit indecent.'

'What I do think is that you're a bit nit-witted,' said Juliette. 'I bet you someone has already spoken to the cousins about it.'

'I know they have,' I said.

'There, you see? What did I say? How do you expect to succeed in life if you will put sentiment before everything else?'

'I couldn't be happier to hear you say that! As a matter of fact I am the someone who has already spoken to the cousins.'

'Oh, my darling! How happy I am!' A tear ran down her beaming face. 'That poor old boy won't have gone mad for nothing!'

I looked at my wife in some perplexity. 'Ah?' I said. 'Good . . . The only thing is that they don't want to let me the house. *They* don't think it would be decent.'

'The pigs!' said Juliette. 'Not decent . . . did you see them, peering under the furniture?'

'That's just it. They've calculated the cost of the inventory and the removals. They said to me – and they really sounded as though they meant it – "The administration of this estate will be a heavy burden on us. We shall be obliged to sell the house if we can't make it pay its way by some means or other." Or other, you understand?'

'No,' said Juliette.

'Which shows,' I remarked, 'that you are more nit-witted than me. They wanted what's known as a premium. It was a frightful job to make them name a figure. When they finally got round to it I said, offhandedly, that in that case it would be more advantageous for me to ask some very good friends of mine – rather important friends – to requisition something for me; even perhaps to requisition this very house. They ended by lowering their figure by a good third.'

'And it's all right?' asked Juliette, flinging her arms round my neck.

'It's all right,' I told her. 'Now I have only got to borrow on your marriage settlement.'

She didn't let this detail worry her and at the end of May we moved into a lovely house. It was spotlessly clean, thanks to M. Belhomme, who had, from the schoolroom to the padded cell, done everything for himself.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Fairy Stories

THE house had been rigorously emptied by Belhomme's relations. They had, in fact, only left the Second Empire bath. They had politely asked my permission to let them dismantle their cousin's, which was a modern one, in order, I imagine, to keep it as a macabre memento. My books and papers lay in one heap on the floor, our clothes and linen lay in another. We had certainly taken possession of a clean house; a house, in fact, swept clean of everything. It was as bare as a bride on her wedding night.

I had inherited from my parents an old house in the Charente and there I had a few bits of furniture stored, but the village carpenter was taking his time in packing them up for us. So it turned out that on the day we became owners of a house, we had to go and sleep at an hotel. Eventually some friends lent us a mattress which we spread on the parquet of the room in which M. Belhomme had reached such a dramatic conclusion, and we lay ourselves down upon it like two poor little skinned rats. Our first night was not conspicuously romantic.

I don't know whether it was the echo that frightened Juliette, or the bachelor's scandalized ghost, but she did everything in a whisper. It was a rest cure for me. As long as the rooms were bare and cold we had nothing but whispered quarrels.

She loved plain-coloured carpets and I Persian rugs. She wanted coloured walls and I white. She insisted upon a

modern bedroom and I wanted my wife in a Marie Antoinette bed.

'What's the point of us bickering,' I said, 'seeing that we shall never have enough money to furnish the rooms in any style? I vote we keep the drawing-room as it is for the day when we have a son. It will be exactly what he needs for learning to ride a bicycle.'

'Louis XVI,' said Juliette, 'is too bare, too cold. I like soft velvety furniture that embraces you. If we can't have Louis XV easy chairs, it will have to be modern. Or Chippendale perhaps. English furniture is very fashionable'. . .'

'And wildly expensive. We'll buy some when it's no longer fashionable. The only drawback is that in that case we shall have to live for two years on a mattress.'

'Well then, modern!' cried Juliette – in a whisper of course.

'I won't sink any lower than the Directoire.'

'Modern or nothing.'

'Nothing then,' I whispered.

And we went to sleep still undecided. She woke me up to tell me I was snoring like a train.

'I don't snore. I know I don't.'

'No,' said Juliette, 'you buzz. But anyhow, how do you know you don't?'

'I've been told I don't.'

'You've slept with other women?'

'Aha, here we go!' I cried, not, I confess, unpleased.

'Aha, here we go!' said Juliette in a different tone.

'But I didn't know you then, my darling!'

'How sly you are. Still, I suppose you may have changed in the last three months.'

'Well! If I could have foreseen it would only take three months of marriage to put me on a mattress on the floor!'

'So,' whispered Juliette, 'you don't want modern, that's quite decided?'

'I want to sleep, that's all.'

'And if I did the painting myself?'

'I don't see the connection.'

She decided to do it, however, on the day we finally agreed on the style. It was at the flea market. We were quarrelling in front of a cabinet. It was obviously not modern, neither was it Directoire. But the saleswoman was a psychologist.

'It's Transitional,' she said.

'Transitional?' asked Juliette. 'You guarantee that?'

The saleswoman didn't hesitate to guarantee it and we carried home our first piece of furniture. It looked very small and lonely. Its transition must have brought it to somewhere around 1848. I had given up half a century but Juliette had had to cede a whole one. But I gave her up ten good years when my furniture arrived from the Charente. It was Second Empire. However, one could sit in the chairs, which was an advantage, and we were grateful to them for coming to our rescue. Juliette beat clouds of dust out of them and assured me that the holes didn't matter in the least. We would cover them later.

'In wine,' she said.

'In lemon yellow,' I said.

'Just as you like,' she said.

'Just as I like?' I stammered.

I leaned on the cabinet and one of its feet slowly folded up under it.

'If you're not careful it will soon be a cabinet pudding,' said Juliette gaily.

'We should never have bought it,' I said. 'What's "transitional" anyway?'

'It's a trick to get us to agree. I agree, you agree, we agree – just like the French cabinet!'

'It isn't funny,' I observed.

'But it's nice,' she said.

It was indeed nice to agree for a change, and seizing what would certainly be a fleeting moment we decided to do up our house in Napoleon III style, round the bath as it were.

Juliette began her painting. She washed the walls, thereby flooding the parquet she had just polished. After which she painted her first panel, fairly successfully, in a pale lavender. She then announced that she thought it might be more sensible to give up waxing the parquet until she had painted the entire room. I added a rider that I thought it would be even more sensible to begin with the ceiling. She gave me the job. I am still wondering how painters manage not to get paint on their faces, in their hair and down their ears and necks.

All she had to do then was to cover up the trails of white-wash I had left on her wall with a fresh coat. Then she attacked the next panel. Before she had finished it we couldn't help noticing that the room looked much bigger, which wasn't exactly what it needed to look, but which was vaguely flattering. We discovered the reason: she had used a deeper blue. Aghast, she let the paint brush fall from her hands. But our friends told us we had had a highly artistic idea, and indeed one day we had the satisfaction of reading in an art magazine that if you want to make a room seem bigger than it actually is, you should paint the walls in different colours.

In the meantime I had picked up the paint brush dropped by my discouraged Juliette, and it only took me three weeks to finish the work on the ground floor. As my shoulders, wrists, calves, and even my kidneys hurt abominably, we entrusted the upper floors to a specialist.

During this time Juliette had bought some tulle and damask for the curtains. When I put them up the hems lay in concertina folds on the floor. She busied herself shortening them, but the results exceeded her expectations by inches, save in the case of two halves which were of the right length.

If they had been of the same material we could have hung them in the same window, but we had no such luck.

The drawing-room, the dining-room, our bedroom, and the two attics I had carpeted with books began to look quite lived in. Only two rooms were left, and the bathroom, the decoration of which we postponed until later.

Belhomme's heirs had not removed the gas cooker, but Juliette repeated with irritating insistence that a cooker alone was not enough for a woman with a man to feed. The problem of the kitchen gave me many a troubled night, and as though that were not enough the gardener then came to enquire as to my tastes in horticulture.

'My tastes,' I told him, 'are essentially modest.'

His were less so. I had never imagined that begonias, petunias, fuchsias and hydrangeas could jeopardize an honest man's budget. To tell the truth I had always thought of them more or less as an act of God.

'We will make a lawn,' I informed the gardener.

'With English grass,' he said. 'But in the border?'

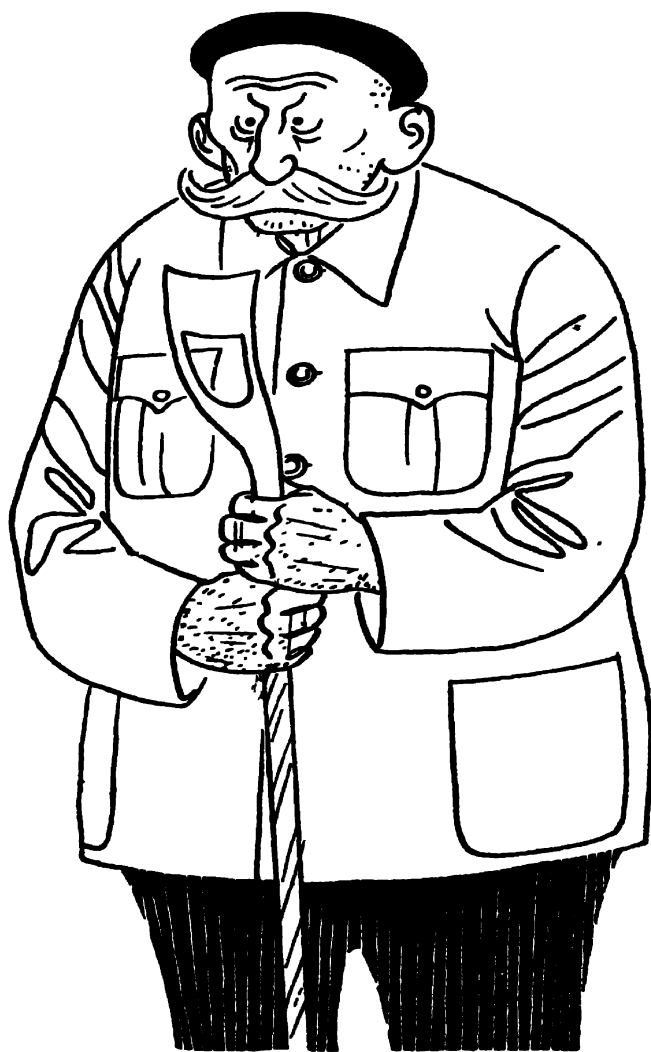
'... A lawn, with a flower or two here and there ... wide apart. And not too tidy ... that will be much prettier.'

He set to with a will and turned the garden inside out. He broke up the clods with care, hoed, sowed and then told me he must have a roller. As soon as he had got an admirably smooth surface he strewed it with a lot of bumpy earth, and then rolled it again. After a fortnight's watering I noticed a green mildew; it was my grass coming up. It was then, of course, time to buy a lawn mower.

'The trouble with your lawn,' said the gardener, 'is the flowers. Someone will have to go round them with a sickle twice a week. It will cost you a lot in labour. There's nothing so expensive as a fine lawn.'

But it was finished. And so, for that matter, was I.

* * *



‘With English grass...’

'I've got something for you,' said Juliette.

'Oh?' I said anxiously.

'Promise me first of all that you'll listen to me without screaming.'

'You know quite well it's you who does the screaming.'

'I never scream!' screamed Juliette.

She leaned over my shoulder and showed me a sheaf of scribblings which looked like an inventory.

'You believe, don't you, that servants belong to another age?'

I had, indeed, undertaken to demonstrate to her that in our highly mechanized era of civilization the slave of woman should no longer be woman – or man – but the robot. And I had cited as an example the American housewife who did everything for herself in her own little food factory. I didn't think she had understood me. My mistake was abysmal.

'This is a list,' said Juliette, 'of some of the things one ought to have in a modern home.'

'All that?' I asked, trailing my finger down the piece of paper.

'That's only for the kitchen. The household gadgets are on the other side. I've left out the bathroom fittings.'

'Good for you,' I told her.

'With these,' said Juliette, 'we shan't need any servants, and your little wife will float through her work like a fairy.'

'And where did you get the information for this magnificent document?'

She blushed. 'I hid it from you,' she said, 'but during our engagement I went and took a domestic economy course.'

And I, who had thought my wife bird-brained! My heart began to melt.

'I even went in for a competition,' said Juliette.

I was just going to go on melting when an idea came to freeze me.

'I suppose,' I asked, 'that if you'd won a prize you would have told me?'

'I can't talk to you,' said Juliette, 'you're so discouraging.'

'Be brave!' I cried. 'Come on, show me your list.'

'Let me explain it to you,' she said. 'First of all everything works by electricity.'

'Ah, so my little wife is to be an electric fairy?' I asked.

'You have a sparkling wit,' observed Juliette coldly. 'I shall replace the gas cooker – except that I shall keep it in case of breakdowns – with an electric cooker because it's cleaner, healthier, and because I want my home to be a homogeneous unit.'

'Where in the hell did you learn this extraordinary jargon?'

She disregarded my question and went on.

'A frigidaire, of course. A vegetable peeler, and a washing machine for the plates which can also be used for washing clothes, and a wringer. Perhaps I could do without the wringer, but I should like to have an iron.'

'Naturally,' I said. 'And what's this?'

'Oh, that's absolutely marvellous! It's a mixer. You put in the vegetables and you push a button. In five seconds you have a *macédoine*, eight seconds you have a *purée*, fifteen seconds and it's a soup.'

'Twenty seconds and it's water?'

She shrugged her shoulders.

'One just sits back.'

'Don't you have to peel the potatoes?'

'But as I shall have a peeler! Now, if you break eggs into it it makes you a mayonnaise in seventeen seconds. I don't believe you even have to break the eggs.'

'Oh? It digests the shells?'

'One can use it for mousses and cocktails – everything really.'

'This really is becoming a fairy story. How much is it?'

‘Wait.’

She had no need to urge me. I waited.

‘We panel the kitchen walls with aluminium sheeting. There’s the drawing. But do look at it! The cupboards shut automatically and the drawers open when you press a button. Everything has been studied scientifically so as to economize in movement. Just think . . . just calculate all the movements I have to make in a day, every day of my life.’

‘Later,’ I said. ‘At this moment I’m making another calculation.’

I gave up half-way through. ‘Fairy story’ wasn’t the right description at all.

* * *

‘And a dog?’ said Juliette. ‘We absolutely must have a dog.’

When I confessed that the necessity for this had escaped me, she explained that a wave of burglaries justified the purchase of a watch dog.

‘Very well,’ I replied, ‘we’ll buy one when we’ve got something for it to watch.’

‘But we’ll never be able to buy anything valuable enough to watch as long as we haven’t a dog to watch it! Do be logical!’

‘Now see here! You know we can’t afford to buy a frigidaire, a peeler, one or two washing machines, an iron, a vacuum cleaner – was that all? And yet you want me to buy a dog.’

‘Precisely,’ said Juliette. ‘It’s precisely because we can’t buy all those things that we shan’t be depriving ourselves of anything if we buy a dog. It’s logical, isn’t it?’

‘You reason superbly,’ I said. ‘Well, just you ruminate over the fact that I only like gun dogs and don’t let’s talk of it any more.’

She was silent a moment. Then: 'Why didn't you tell me, darling, that you've always wanted a gun dog?'

Some men can stop themselves bellowing at their wives; some can't. I didn't.

'I don't want a gun dog!' I bellowed. 'A pack, that's what I want, a pack at my heels! And it would be far less harassing than a woman!'

When I'd finished Juliette continued in a small soft voice:

'Only, if I let you get a gun dog, will you promise me you'll never do any shooting?'

She looked at me with a smile I could have slapped. I took a paper and went to sit on the roof. It was the only place I could be certain she wouldn't come and call 'cuckoo' in the middle of my cogitations. But I was quite incapable of reasoning clearly. A dog? Never. She had a gift for turning the world upside down, and me with it. And I let my thoughts wander idly round this strange woman who loved dogs, ducks – indeed every animal, with the exception of her husband. A sensitive soul who cried when she saw an escalope, so much did she love calves. And who, moreover, didn't like veal. And who dared to forbid me to go shooting! When it was probably the only joy life would offer me from now on. Or rather, it would be if I had a . . .

I came down from my refuge and said in a menacing tone:

'I am going to buy an Irish setter.'

Two or three days later while she was shopping in Paris and I was working, savouring the peacefulness, the telephone rang. She was at a kennels in the rue Jean Mermoz and there was the most adorable puppy imaginable there.

'An Irish setter?'

'Of course.'

And needless to say someone else wanted it and I must go there immediately. He had an astounding pedigree but he was distinctly thinner than Gandhi.

'We'll have it examined by a vet before we buy it,' I said to the dealer.

The other prospective buyer evidently wasn't in much of a hurry as the dealer agreed to wait till the following day. It was arranged that Juliette should call in to collect the dog and take it to the vet, and we amused ourselves, before leaving, by playing with half a dozen little boxers which had just arrived in a cardboard box and which were clamouring for their feeding bottle.

The next day, at the end of the afternoon, Juliette climbed up to my attic.

'The little setter was ill,' she announced.

'I thought as much.'

'So I took him back to the dealer.'

'Good girl.'

'I may say,' she continued, 'that it broke my heart.'

'I know,' I said, 'one gets attached to that sort of dog terribly quickly.'

'Doesn't one?' she said impetuously. 'And weren't the little boxers too sweet for words?'

'With their crumpled heads . . .'

' . . . and far too big ears . . .'

' . . . they might have been philosophers.'

'Don't you think,' mused Juliette, 'one could get terribly attached to them too?'

'Why not?' I said. 'Now, darling, you must let me do some work.'

'You did say why not, didn't you? Well, come and see.'

She took me by the hand and opened the door. The cardboard box was on the landing and the six little boxers were inside it. I looked at them and I looked at Juliette. Her smile remained slightly anxious. The puppies climbed about over each other waving their little pink tongues at me. Somebody barked. It was me.

'Don't scream!' said Juliette. 'The dealer is in the hall.'

'Tell him to come up!' I yelled. 'Tell him to come up right away! Six puppies! Six dogs! Where is he?'

'If only you'd let me speak,' pleaded Juliette. 'I've a taxi waiting and it's ticking up.'

'Speak then!' I said. 'Six boxers . . . at thirty kilos apiece. One hundred and eighty kilogrammes of dog in this house!'

'You're sweet,' said Juliette, 'but I'll only accept one. The dealer wanted to come with me so that you could choose one for yourself.'

'Ah? ♀. .' I said.

I was on the point of kissing her, but I saw in time I was being imbecile. 'Choose one yourself,' I grumbled, and went into my study, slamming the door behind me. Soon she called me.

'I've chosen this one,' she said.

I turned my head away.

'Pay for it please,' she added.

I paid, and the funny thing was that I felt my heart contract when the dealer took the other five away.

The puppy was as depressed as I. I refused to care about anything for two hours, but he refused to eat for two days. He sat shivering in his basket, but Juliette burst out laughing when I suggested taking him to bed with us. He overcame his sorrow, however, and quickly acquired sufficient energy to tear my books into minute shreds. I let him out in the garden so that he could work off his surplus energy, and he made the most of the splendid opportunity offered him by madly ploughing up my still young lawn.

We decided, aptly, to call him Tyrant. And because the animal wasn't intended for shooting but for guarding I agreed to Juliette's idea that I should pay myself back for him by selling my gun. There was a bit left over which she used as a first payment on some kitchen equipment.

'You see,' she said, 'I was right. Not only has the dog not deprived us of what we want, but thanks to him we've been able to order a refrigerator.'

Besides, it was logic.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Maids of All Work

JULIETTE drudged gallantly. Her fingers became black, and life became normal. Nevertheless, at night, she no sooner put her head down on the pillow than she was asleep, and as a husband I must confess I thought we were carrying normality a bit too far.

She did not complain so much of the fatigue as of the monotony.

'I'm perfectly willing to cook luncheon,' she said, 'but the discouraging thing is that it's always eaten.'

One day she climbed the two flights up to my dovecote – to tell the truth she came up several times every day, just for the pleasure of tickling my neck, after which she complained that her legs were falling off. But on this day she appeared carrying two plates.

'They're breaking my arms,' she said.

I asked her how two plates could do any such thing?

'You see these two plates?' continued Juliette. I saw them.

'What's the difference between this one and that one?'

I couldn't see any difference.

'Is this a quiz?' I asked.

'No,' said Juliette, 'it's a curse. You have before you the curse of woman, and I'd like you to touch it with your finger. This plate hasn't been dirtied, and this one I've washed!'

'Well done,' I said. 'But I can't see the difference . . .'

'That's exactly what I mean,' mocked Juliette, 'you can't see the difference! The difference, my dear man, is invisible.'

A woman's work is not only never done but never noticed! I wonder if you remotely understand. Take an armchair or a table . . . if there's dust on it you notice it of course. But if there isn't any dust on it you don't dream of noticing the duster which has removed it. Do you get me? Another example . . .'

'I've got you,' I cut in. 'You want one or two servants.'

'I can't tell you a thing!' protested Juliette. 'You take everything the wrong way. I come to you simply because you're the only person I can confide in, because I've nobody else but you in the world.' She stopped abruptly and shook her curls. 'Besides, I'd be quite content with one maid.'

'Be careful,' I told her. 'If I have to pay for a maid you won't get your little mechanical food factory.'

And here again, as usual, I made a huge mistake.

• • •

At the end of June servants are rare in domestic agencies. I learned that they disliked leaving a situation before their employers had paid for their holidays. If we could wait until October there would be an abundance. But in December the possibility of New Year presents produced a fresh costiveness on the market, which would be followed by an abrupt relaxation after the first of January. Unfortunately we weren't looking for a maid for the following year.

The manageress of the domestic agency told us that any transaction would be at our own risk. We believed she exaggerated.

• • •

The first one Juliette brought home had real style. Long legs, a slender ankle, shining fair hair. Poised high on her heels she moved about with regal assurance. I would have enormously admired the way she handed us a dish of stew balanced on her

tapering fingers if she hadn't dropped ash from her cigarette into the sauce.

She was, she assured us, quite used to doing the laundry as she had always washed out her smalls in the wash-basin in her hotel bedroom. As for cooking, she knew all about that too, having simmered bits and bobs on a spirit lamp for years.

'What do you think she is?' whispered Juliette. 'A floozie gone on the rocks? Perhaps a society woman abandoned by her husband? Do you think perhaps we ought to ask her to have coffee with us?'

This question preoccupied us throughout the whole of luncheon. Juliette found the perfect solution: we wouldn't have coffee. Instead I felt compelled to have a little siesta. Juliette woke me up to give me the news. She had made friends with the young woman, who had opened her heart to her. There was no man in her life, nor indeed out of it. She had had an important executive post at Patou's and was now unemployed.

'She's charming, you know,' said Juliette. 'And beautiful too, don't you think?'

This was certainly my opinion, but I had judged it would be unwise to say so.

'You think so?' I mumbled.

'And she's an expert, you know,' continued Juliette. 'That reminds me, we simply must order an auto-cooker. It's incredible how much gas and electricity one saves with it. She explained it all to me.'

Juliette explained it all to me too, but her explanations were so long and so complicated I preferred to yield without argument. Then I telephoned the dressmaking establishment to get particulars. I found that our treasure was a mannequin and that they had had to sack her because she was always slapping the other girls. I was in the course of communicating this information to Juliette when the blonde crossed the

drawing-room as though she were looking for something, pivoted lithely on her heels and retired, head high and foot arched.

'You ought to walk like that,' I said to Juliette.

But the door opened again.

'I don't see a radio,' said a stern voice.

'No radio?' I echoed.

'In the kitchen,' continued the stern voice.

'No radio in the kitchen?' I repeated.

'No . . .' stammered Juliette, ' . . . in the . . . my God!'

'We forgot it in our plans,' I said sarcastically. 'You must forgive us.'

The door slammed.

'Do you think she'll land me a slap too?' whispered Juliette.

I said: 'I have a better proposition. Suppose we land her out in the street?'

'Thank you very much,' said Juliette. 'Anyone can see it isn't you who does the washing-up. No, I'm going to lend her our set.'

We got it back the next day as the mannequin informed us she definitely couldn't settle down to her job, and left us. She also left some lasting traces of her brief stay, for Juliette had learned to walk head up and foot arched. It was ravishing to look at but she knocked over a lot of things in her stately progress.

The auto-cooker had already been delivered . . . of course.

* * *

The next maid of all work was a man. More precisely he was an Annamite, and he was called Tzianck – I remember all this because he was with us quite a long time; ten days. He was perfect. Too perfect. That's why we fired him.

When I think we bought a washing machine on the instalment plan, so as to be certain of keeping him! Juliette had

also wanted me to buy an electric iron, but mercifully gave up the idea as he was such a marvellous laundrymaid.

The moment I came into the house he loomed into view with a tray of cocktails, or tea, or whatever he thought most suited to the hour. I had never in my life seen a kitchen so well cared for. He was excessively refined, and honest as well. Indeed, when a piece of meat or a packet of butter had, as it were, been broken into, he didn't finish it off in secret. He threw it openly into the dustbin.

He had a wonderfully equable temperament. When Juliette and I argued he never, as does our present Emilienne, joined in the quarrel. He averted his eyes and gave an almost imperceptible smile. He kept his distance. But the feeling he gave us was that we should keep ours. Juliette said he was a snob.

* * *

We had a job replacing him. His successor, like the mannequin, had no references, but unlike the mannequin, she was old and had a hairy face. She didn't stay long enough for me to remember her name, but I recall there was a terrific thunderstorm going on when she came for her interview. I talked about the weather. She shut me up by asserting that the thunderstorms they had in her district were much more violent. We engaged her all the same.

She had a little parcel under her arm, wrapped up in an old newspaper. She kept it there all the time, whatever household duties she was engaged in. Juliette once asked her to clean the lavatories which hadn't been done since Tzianck's departure. She refused, saying they weren't clean. Juliette replied that this was just exactly why they had to be washed. They failed to agree. Then she served us with a roast chicken which she had forgotten to draw, and Juliette scolded her. She began to cry, saying she could see we were holding some-

thing against her that we didn't want to tell her about. And she dabbed her eyes with her parcel.

Coming home one evening I found the knives and forks in the garden. She told me it was Madame's fault as Madame had told her to shake the tablecloth out of the window. So the next day we packed her off to some friends who were also looking for a maid. They only kept her one day. She came back the same night to announce to us that if we wanted to take her back she now had a reference.

* * *

Juliette returned to the domestic agency and was rather coolly received. She thought she had the right to expect an apology from the manageress for having sent us a lunatic, but the manageress was economical with her excuses and merely reproached Juliette for having turned the maid out of the house. There was no one else for us. To tell the truth there was no one for anyone else either, as we were already in July.

Then I had an inspiration. An artist friend of mine employed a Senegalese as a servant. He had always seemed a sensible sort of fellow so I telephoned him. The Senegalese immediately sent round one of his protégés who had only recently landed in France.

He was called Bobodon. He was very athletic looking but he seemed peaceable. My friend had told us that if one was nice to a Senegalese there was nothing he wouldn't do for one. Bobodon was so nice we did everything for him.

As a welcoming gesture Juliette had put a bunch of flowers in his room. Bobodon went down into the garden, cut all the remaining flowers and brought them in to Juliette. How could I scold him without appearing a savage in his eyes?

'Did you see his smile when he handed me the flowers?'

said Juliette. 'I must say his teeth are much whiter than yours.'

I was under the shower and Juliette, completely naked, was standing on the carpet doing abdominal exercises when Bobodon knocked on the door. She hurled herself, yelling, under the bedclothes, which didn't deter Bobodon from coming in.

'You say knock before come in. Me knock and come in!' And he carried in our morning café au lait.

From that day Juliette waited until Bobodon had come and gone before she got up. To save time, no doubt, she took to brushing her hair in bed. But I don't see why she slapped on all that lipstick so early in the morning if it wasn't to make Bobodon her slave. He would put the tray on her knees with infinite delicacy; she thanked him smilingly; he smiled to thank her for her smile. When they had finished I could breakfast. In return, at midday, she took him a glass of vermouth. Mine was too dry for his taste. We bought him a sweeter brand.

After washing-up he placed on his head a grey hat, put on gloves, and went for a walk round the lawn. We didn't want to thwart him. We thought that if, by some freak of fortune, he was still with us in winter he would look very pretty against the snow.

From his two fiancées he got letters written by a priest. He asked Juliette to read them to him, but he begged me to go out while she did so. Juliette told him he was treating me rather churlishly. He acknowledged his mistake with good grace and so as to be forgiven he had an engaging idea: he had the photographs of his two fiancées framed, and propped them up on my writing table. One had rings in her nose, the other wore them in her ears like a European. But on both the priest had written 'To my little black boy'.

'You know,' said Juliette, 'that's a remarkably fine present. I believe that little black boy loves you.'

'I think on the contrary it's you he loves,' I answered modestly.

'Don't be ridiculous,' said Juliette.

'Then don't you be grotesque.'

'Bobodon in love with me!' cried Juliette. She went on: 'And then what? . . . it would be rather nice.'

'Yes, wouldn't it?' I said. 'Particularly the "and then what?" I adore piccaninnies.'

'Yes, aren't they adorable?' said Juliette.

That night we couldn't get to sleep because there was a mouse scratching under our bed. We should probably have disregarded it if our young Tyrant, who was still sleeping in our room, hadn't decided that it was a noise which annoyed him prodigiously. He galloped round the bed, quivering with excitement, releasing from time to time a strangled yelp. But though he flattened himself to the ground he couldn't get his big head under the bed, try as he would. We sat up to get a better view of the hunt. Juliette screamed encouragements to Tyrant and I screamed louder than either of them to make them both shut up. Suddenly Tyrant gave a crazy howl and spun round. I jumped out of bed. He had got his paws caught up in some cotton. Unravelling it with some difficulty I found it led in one direction to a reel in his mouth and in the other to the door – and behind the door to Bobodon's hand. He was sitting on the landing and laughing silently, wagging his head. He smelt strongly of vermouth.

'Aren't you ashamed?' I asked him.

'Me shamed,' said Bobodon, laughing.

'It's not good to drink like this.'

'Priest forbid,' said Bobodon.

Tyrant, who judged we were neglecting the essentials, dropped the cotton reel between his paws and gave us a few authoritative barks.

'Who taught you to drink?' I continued.

'Madame, vermouth,' said Bobodon. And he leant his head on his knees. I tapped him on the shoulder and Tyrant, ever compassionate, came and licked his hair.

'Get along,' I told him, 'go to bed.'

He got himself up on to very trembling legs.

'Me all alone,' he said. 'You take Bobodon's fiancées. You take Madame. Bobodon nothing.'

Juliette had overheard our conversation.

'Do you know what he needs?' she said. 'He needs something to play with. I don't believe there will ever be a more promising moment than this for us to buy that mixer I was telling you about.'

Bobodon got his mixer, cash-down. He amused himself frenziedly with it, but not for long. Soon he fell back again into a morose mood. It was obviously me who was making him sulky. If ever I wanted him I had to call four or five times. When he did at last put in an appearance and I asked him why he hadn't answered he said:

'Not know what you want.'

Things might have sorted themselves out if only he had wanted something we could have given him. If he had asked us for a dish-washing machine, a vacuum cleaner or even a mechanical horse for instance. He was so nice we could refuse him nothing, except, of course, the cause of his melancholy. Even Juliette herself was unable to drag a smile out of him. In the end he quietly explained himself.

'You always speak with Monsieur,' he said.

Juliette tried to point out that we were married to each other. Bobodon shook his head.

'You speak with Monsieur.'

For forty-eight hours we didn't speak in his presence. He gave us suspicious sidelong glances. I pretended to turn my back on Juliette. If necessary I would have struck her. But he approached me, menacingly.

'You, Monsieur, not nice to Madame.

I didn't know what on earth to do to please him. Juliette had reached the end of her tether too. We parted from him cautiously. All the same we had reached the fourteenth of July.

• • •

We began to get well known in the district, almost as well known as a circus. The rumours which accompanied Bobodon's departure sent us Brunchaut. She bore the name of a noble French family, which I won't mention. Besides, she hadn't the right to use it – at least not more than half of it, as she had been born on the wrong side of its blanket, so to speak.

She began working on me immediately with her scent. She had lovely auburn hair, done in the English style, which she found useful for brushing across my ear when she changed my plate. I pretended not to look at her so that she needn't imagine I was admiring her silhouette. In point of fact it was rather fetchingly outlined by a pair of mechanic's overalls.

Brunchaut wasn't with us for two days before she took to her bed. I made a mistake in going to enquire anxiously about her health.

'It's a miscarriage,' she said, staring me straight in the eye. 'It isn't the first and it won't be the last. What pigs men are!'

I had the impression she told me this to give me confidence.

In any case she recovered with great ease and we were then able to appreciate her lightning service. When she swept the bedroom for example, the brushes, gloves and handkerchiefs which Juliette had the sorry habit of dropping here and there, were all swept into one corner with the dust so that she only had to bend down once to pick them up. It was a great saving of time. The same with doors: she had quickly grasped the fundamental fact that if one didn't shut a door



Brunehaut

one spared oneself the trouble of opening it. On the subject of doors I am a maniac – or so Brunchaut rapidly made me think. I felt she was too distinguished to take unvarnished rebukes, so I mixed into them a few flowery apologies.

‘I don’t hold it against you,’ she said. And she noisily slammed the door so as to make quite certain I heard she was obeying me.

One morning Juliette brought home from the market a salmon of formidable dimensions. It was a bargain, she told me. I hadn’t yet learned to dread bargains. To have an excuse for this one we made a list of people to whom we had owed hospitality for a long time. Brunchaut assured us we could count on her. She even offered to get her lover, who was a chauffeur at a big house, to come and help in the kitchen.

We made excuses to our guests for being so behind-hand with our invitations. We had had so many domestic difficulties. But who hadn’t, these days? It’s a dismal age. Happily this girl looked quite respectable. ‘She’s even got quite a style, don’t you think?’

The salmon made its entrance on a borrowed silver dish, carried on outstretched arm by, apparently, a priestess. It was a sight which suspended all conversation. Then the dish took on a gentle rolling motion, and suddenly it was as though Brunchaut was chasing after a butterfly. The salmon landed on the floor. Brunchaut said calmly, in a clear distinct voice: ‘F . . . it !’

The dog, which had never seen a salmon on a floor, was transfixed. So were we. She picked up the fish and stuck it back on the dish with a light twist of the hand. Then she went back to the door to have another go at it. She made her second entry with the same aristocratic serenity. We sent them back to the kitchen, both she and her salmon, and while she made an omelette we exploited our wittiness about this deplorable episode, to its deepest depths.

I've sometimes asked myself whether she wasn't some premonition to invite her chauffeur in that night. At any rate it took them two days to finish the salmon. The chauffeur seemed to like being with us; he spent all his spare time, and more, in our house. Brunehaut wasn't overfond of working and handed over to him a vast number of chores.

'If Madame will allow me . . .' he would say. 'To show my gratitude to Madame for the salmon . . . it was remarkable.'

Sometimes, in the evening, he took Brunehaut out in his Cadillac. I wouldn't have actually detested a car like that myself, only a bit smaller perhaps. But that was a far-off dream as Brunehaut had insisted on my buying a vegetable peeler because, as Juliette had pointed out, nothing spoils the hands so much as vegetables, except washing-up. I resisted the dish-washing machine. Enough was enough.

But Brunehaut didn't enjoy it for as long as we hoped, and indeed had the right to expect. She went off one evening in her car and never came back.

* * *

I was thinking of taking up the career of a domestic servant myself when the agency telephoned us. Apparently the masters had gone on holiday as well as the servants, and there was a crisis on both sides, as the agency didn't know where to place a fifty-year-old pearl who had fallen out with her employer. She had, we were told, a 'sound' character.

Celestine showed us some dazzling references.

'And Madame?' she asked.

'And Madame?' repeated Juliette in a foolish echo.

'Madame will understand that I would like to know with whom I am placing myself. I have not had time to find out anything from the tradespeople. Has Madame any references?'

'Well,' said Juliette, 'we have had a young woman, very pretty, who was a mannequin and didn't know how to do

anything. Then an Annamite, perfect except that he threw the butter in the dustbin. Then a kind of lunatic. A sentimental Senegalese. And the illegitimate daughter of a duke. There, I don't think I've forgotten anyone.'

Celestine shook her head, saying, 'tstt, tstt.'

'And all this in how long?'

'Oh!' said Juliette, 'in barely a month.'

'I hope for your sake,' said Celestine, 'it was just bad luck. Madame can understand why I hesitate, although Madame does not look at all bad. May I have a quick glance at the house?'

She found there were far too many rooms. It is true she had a larger house herself, in her native Morvan, but when one is working for oneself it's not the same, is it? Although of course she had a taste for being in service otherwise she would have retired. 'I suggest,' she concluded, 'that I take Madame on trial.'

We thanked her for her kindness. This woman, we thought, will be the perfect guardian of our home. She was.

'I've noticed,' she said, 'that Monsieur's nerves are not good.'

So she added water to my coffee and drank hers very black, without a thought for her own health. All the same, my nerves did not entirely cease to trouble me – for example, when she forbade Juliette to put a foot in a shop and got the tradesmen to deliver parcels and charge them to my account.

'Let everyone do his own job,' she said, 'and the sheep will be well guarded. And let me warn Monsieur that he can dispense with reproaches as a good servant has an answer to everything.'

This woman had principles. Juliette wanted to make friends with her as she had attempted to do with the others.

'Servants should not consort with their employers,' declared Celestine. 'My place is not in the drawing-room.'

That was why she wished to have one of the drawing-room armchairs in the kitchen. Still we were well content until suddenly, it was the end of July. It arrived with an avalanche of bills—for a frigidaire, an auto-cooker, a washing machine, a potato peeler. It gave me such a nasty turn I retired to bed. Juliette announced with some embarrassment there was yet another bill to pay. It was, incidentally, absurdly low; for frying pans, kettles and casseroles.

‘I didn’t dare confess . . .’ said Juliette, ‘but Celestine has never used any of our mechanical gadgets.’

CHAPTER NINE

Home Nursing

‘WHEN one is overwrought,’ said the only one of our friends’ doctors who had had the decency not to go on holiday, ‘one always runs the risk of getting jaundice.’

He prescribed an infant’s diet and abandoned me to Juliette’s tender mercies; a Juliette armed with phials, tablets and a formidable syringe.

No debts, no bile. All I thought about was how to get my financial ship onto an even keel. With one stroke of my pen I crossed out our proposed expenditure for August; it reappeared immediately under the heading *Medicine*. On the side of *Receipts* I could hardly, from my bed, interview celebrated people, broadcast my pertinent observations or report on the world’s million misdeeds; but this was what the manufacturers of household equipment were waiting for me to do. The idea came to me that I might enumerate my afflictions in a book, but they seemed to me so dire I doubted whether anyone would find them amusing. I tried to think of something else. I was determined to make my enforced leisure profitable. But I hadn’t accounted for Juliette.

There was the thermometer: twice a day and also every time she felt curious about my temperature. There was my pulse: as she had never been able to count very well she had to concentrate very hard when she took it, which exhausted her. It exhausted me, too. My pulse galloped and she piled on two extra covers. Then she worried about me sweating so much. This was the signal for her to make me get up while

she changed the sheets. I sat in an armchair, where I would have been quite comfortable if she hadn't wound a blanket round my legs, another round my shoulders, and put an eiderdown on my head. There was also the ice pack which, as Juliette brought me a hot drink nearly every quarter of an hour, melted at once on my liver. I reproached her for over-tiring herself. This coincided with Celestine's opinion, and she, having had enough of Juliette running between my room and the kitchen, threatened to go and then went.

In moments of respite I telephoned several newspapers offering my bed-bound services. In our business there is a new 'speciality', the re-writing by experienced French journalists of badly-written close-ups and features. I found an editor who had, on his desk, the diary of a little friend of Stalin's. It could not be denied that her authenticity was doubtful, for the great Western powers were not once called lustful vipers. They never got lower than slimy rats. All the same the tone was agreeably familiar though studded with Montmartre slang which badly needed to be russified. Could I adapt all that, and in particular introduce some typically Russian mistakes, always, of course, keeping to purely grammatical French?

I gave my word that nothing could be easier, and despite Juliette's opposition, I summoned an expert.

'You should never have accepted such work,' she said. 'For one thing, it's unworthy of you. And in your condition! And then I thought you told me you weren't in the least bit interested in politics!'

At last the expert arrived. Juliette greeted her with a scowling face and introduced her into my room with so sharp a push that she was sent sprawling onto my bed. Juliette growled something that sounded like 'What cheek!' and waited, glued to the floor like a limpet.

'This is Tamara,' I told her. 'Didn't I speak to you about her?'

'Delighted to meet you,' said Juliette in the most insulting tone imaginable. For me she added: 'My compliments, darling.'

Tamara was the star Circassian dancer who showed such tact on that evening in St Germain des Prés when I had behaved so much like a fiancé. In the past, when I was a free man, we had, I rather think, exchanged a few amorous platitudes. I had told Juliette all about it; I wanted her to have confidence in me, and so I confided in her. It was just an idea.

Presumably this was the cause of the welcoming shove: it can hardly have been that she wished to throw Tamara into my arms.

If Juliette had had tact the situation needn't have been at all embarrassing – in fact it could have been very agreeable. But Juliette had put her hands on her hips – a vulgar gesture – and she seemed determined to make her helpless bedridden husband regret his frankness.

'Sit down, do,' I said to Tamara, pointing to the chair nearest the bed-head. 'So, my dear, you're going to be kind enough to work with me a little on this Kremlin tittle-tattle?'

'Oughtn't you to have said "darling"?' remarked Juliette.

'Forgive me,' I said to Tamara, 'I'm not well enough to flog her. But, you know, she can be quite charming at times. I wouldn't want you to think I was engaged in taming a shrew.'

You can see I was doing my level best to give the conversation a friendly turn? But I was, once again, sadly surprised to note that Juliette had no sense of humour.

Tamara gave Juliette a smile, but it simply bounded off. There was a silence. I hurriedly filled it.

'You have still,' I said, 'the same lovely black eyes.'

For me it was a banality: her eyes were lovely, and black, and I knew it. But I had the impression that Juliette took



Tamara

this remark to be deliberately provocative. I made another effort.

'It's awfully nice of you to have come to see a yellow man. Because I'm yellow all over, you know?'

'I don't want to embarrass you during this medical report,' said Juliette abruptly in a pinched voice. 'You can call me when you're finished.'

She had gone. I pulled the sheets right up to my chin. Tamara looked at me and burst out laughing.

'You poor old thing!' she said. 'The answer is that, quite simply, she's mad about you.'

'And she imagines that my yellow skin must be desirable!'

'What an idea!' said Tamara laughing till she cried.

'Now this,' I continued, 'is what it's all about. I have here the intimate diary of Stalin's little friend. It obviously owes its existence to the pen of some history student who probably needed money to prepare for his examinations – or to pay for his living expenses in the cafés of Montmartre. It's full of sensational things, but the style leaves much to be desired from the journalistic point of view. To begin with it's got no punch. Look at this . . .'

'You know,' said Tamara, 'all Russians don't speak all languages. You're not, I hope, counting on me to translate it into English?'

'You know Russians – the way they think. I want you to tell me, in French . . .'

The door opened.

'Just a minute,' said Juliette, 'it's time for an injection.'

'Juliette,' I murmured, '*please*.'

It's a remarkable thing, but a man feels absolutely defenceless before a woman armed with a syringe. I begged her in vain to postpone the operation. But she had sawn off the end of the phial and was carefully sucking the liquid up into the

syringe. Then she raised it and started to release air bubbles, pressing on the plunger with a callous thumb.

'Listen, Juliette . . .'

She put down the syringe and approached me, holding some cotton wool.

'No honestly,' I murmured, 'I really think that Tamara . . .'

'Well what?' said Juliette. She turned to Tamara and said sweetly: 'You won't be seeing anything new, will you? Although perhaps from a different angle!' she added ferociously. 'Come on, now, onto your stomach, and lift up your pyjama-jacket! Higher, to the shoulders! There . . . right buttock or left buttock?'

'You choose,' I mumbled into the pillow.

'Good heavens, he looks just like a sieve,' came Tamara's voice after a brief moment of contemplation.

'Yes, doesn't he?' said Juliette's voice proudly.

'How many do you give him a day?'

'It depends. Some days I have to have a lot of tries before I get the needle in properly.'

There was an agonizing silence.

'Look how taut he is,' said Juliette. 'Feel him . . . go on, feel him!'

'He certainly is.'

'Have you ever felt such a hard behind?'

'Well, I remember a cossack once . . .' began the Circassian.

I gave a nervous twitch. The first jab had come without a word of warning.

'Bogged it!' said Juliette. 'I would be interested to meet your cossack.'

'Two centimetres,' said Tamara, who was conscientiously following the operation, 'not quite two centimetres.'

'No good,' said Juliette. 'I must do it again.'

She tore out the needle and tried again.

'That's better,' announced Tamara, 'but it's a bit crooked.'

The second withdrawal hurt considerably more. The next shot only gave me a scratch. I lifted my head out of the pillow.

'It's not so much,' I explained, 'that she's awkward . . .'

'I do it very well,' interrupted Juliette, 'on other people. On people I don't love. Can't you understand that?'

'Bring along your cossack,' I said to Tamara, 'and you'll see how well she gives injections. It's not because she's awkward,' I repeated, 'it's because she loves me.'

'Ah!' said Juliette, 'so it's like that, is it?'

'Oh, but he said it so nicely,' pleaded Tamara.

I had resumed my prostrate position. There was a big 'ahan!' followed by a smack.

'Bravo!' I said, 'I didn't feel a thing. Is it in?'

I gave a roar. Juliette was wagging the head of the needle.

'Can you feel it?' she asked.

I could feel it.

'Now,' she continued, 'for the injection. This is the most painful bit of the lot.'

She stretched out her hand behind her to pick up the syringe, touched it, and the syringe fell to the floor and broke.

'Oh!' cried Juliette. 'I really don't have much luck.'

'And me,' I asked, 'what about me?'

'I must go and boil another syringe,' said Juliette.

I tried to turn round. The needle twisted in a muscle. I fell back flat on my stomach. Juliette considered me from above with grave satisfaction.

'It's beautifully embedded,' she said. Then she threw a quick glance at Tamara and added graciously: 'I now entrust my husband to your care.'

I heard the door shut and Juliette's footsteps clattering downstairs.

'She's hurrying,' I remarked. 'She's not as sure of us as all that.'

I joked so as to regain a little of my natural glamour, but

it wasn't very easy or very comfortable. Tamara didn't answer. She sat on the edge of the bed. Her hand came and gently stroked one of my shoulder blades.

'Vania darling,' she murmured in a quivering voice, 'my little pigeon. Do you know that yellow is very becoming to you?'

I changed cheeks on the pillow and peered up at her to the best of my ability.

'My dove,' I said, 'don't you think you've teased me enough?'

'How unhappy you look,' sighed Tamara, 'and how soft your skin is . . . oh! love of my life!'

She leant forward and neatly placed a kiss between my shoulder blades. This made me tremble, but it made the needle tremble too. I throttled a death rattle by biting the pillow.

'It's lovely, isn't it?' breathed the Circassian.

Again she pressed passionate lips to my back and again I bit the pillow. Would Juliette never finish boiling that syringe? Tamara gave a heavy sigh; by squinting I could see that she was trying to plunge her burning eyes into mine as she said:

'How you suffer, my pigeon! It's because of this then . . . ! You called on me for help and I didn't understand! But when I saw that needle in your behind I knew - I knew my Vania - that I'd never stopped loving you! I swear it by St Stanislas!'

'Tamara,' I muttered feebly, 'will you in the name of our love and St Stanislas lift me up?'

With an agile bound Tamara the dancer was on her feet, or rather on one toe, and enveloping me in a look of abject devotion.

'Never,' she said. 'You are so beautiful, so pathetic . . . let me photograph you with my heart.'

'You can send me a print,' said Juliette brightly, coming

in with a saucepan. 'There . . .' She put the saucepan down and filled up the new syringe. 'You won't cry out?' she said softly. 'I know it's painful . . .'

'Very painful?' asked Tamara. 'Let me do it then!'

'If that's all you need to make you happy,' said Juliette innocently.

'It couldn't be worse than a kiss,' I mumbled.

'I love men who know how to suffer,' said Tamara wildly.

'Ah?' said Juliette who hadn't a Circassian soul. She added coldly: 'Unlike me.'

* * *

Juliette didn't discover until the next injection that there was a mouth painted in the middle of my back. Although I explained in detail what an ordeal this kiss had been I saw that it had put her in a bad humour; seven times she played darts on my behind before holing my skin to her satisfaction. And at each shot she said:

'And *that's* for Tamara!'

CHAPTER TEN

The Sweets of Life

THERE is nothing a human being can't master, and after three weeks of practice Juliette became a first-rate inoculator. But by a deplorable coincidence my liver then deflated itself.

'Pity,' sighed Juliette. 'Just when I was getting hardened.'

'It's me who should have been getting hardened,' I observed. 'Hardened to what anyway?'

'To your sufferings, darling. Anyhow . . . I think we both deserve a holiday.'

She set to work dreaming dreams of fresh air and salt water. I set to work doing my accounts. The result clearly showed that our dreams were hypothetical since we hadn't enough money to pay for even a quarter of a dream.

'Supposing we sent out an S O S to my parents?' asked Juliette.

I opposed this vigorously. I had already mortgaged her dowry, that was enough. I had my pride and I wasn't going to invite my mother-in-law to trample me in the dirt.

'I dare say you prefer me to finish the summer paddling in the melting tar of this city.'

I replied my soul loved honour too much for me to prefer anything else. This explanation didn't seem satisfactory. She went out, slamming the door. Where did she go? I only found out months later. She went and showed my managing director a portrait of my liver, my soul, and my bank account.

I thought it perfectly normal when my news editor rang

me up and said: 'We've had an invitation to send someone to visit a camp. It's in Corsica, near Calvi. Air passage paid. It seems there are people there living like savages and liking it. It might be worth a look . . .'

I ran to give the good news to Juliette.

'What luck!' she cried. 'But how on earth did you manage to hook such a gorgeous job?'

'Oh well,' I answered modestly, 'one just has to know the ropes.'

The paper gave me eight days to discover the secret of happiness. It wasn't perhaps, very much.

* * *

Yet we only needed to look at ourselves to discover it.

A motor coach had taken us from the aerodrome to the camp – tents designed for two set in the pines on the edge of Calvi bay, placed in such studied disorder that every man could think himself alone with the sea.

Juliette put on her briefest bikini and I my bathing slip. Anything more would have seemed indecent.

'Who was right?' I began, slapping the sides of our two bulging suitcases. This was an allusion to the argument we had had just before we left. Juliette always invented the most preposterous reasons for encumbering herself with perfectly useless dresses, sweaters, trousers, and shoes to go with . . .

'It's going to be difficult,' I continued, 'unpacking all this. I suppose what you'd really like is for them to bring us a second tent for your wardrobe? But I doubt if it would have any hanging cupboards. Well, what about hanging all this clobber on the pine branches? It would be splendidly decorative. Of course, if you'd listened to me it would have been too easy . . .' I stopped, astonished. Juliette should have made a retort ages before, and I found myself short of words.

She looked at me and smiled. I looked at her.

'What,' I said, 'what in the hell does it matter anyway?'

'What indeed,' said Juliette.

* * *

'I wonder,' I said to Juliette several days later, 'how I'm going to transcribe happiness. It's a disheartening job.'

'Isn't it?' she said gaily.

'The paper will be less satisfied than you.'

'I don't want to know about it,' said Juliette.

'Me neither,' I said.

We didn't want to know about anything. The camp had its library which sold papers, or rather tried to sell them. If someone ever got around to buying one he could easily sit in the middle of a group of friends and no one would bother to read over his shoulder; and even if his glance strayed automatically to the daily catastrophe in six columns, he turned away immediately. There was a bar planted in the middle of the pine trees and a wireless in the middle of the bottles, but the barman chased away the news with a turn of the button.

I worried myself remarkably little about the people I was supposed to be investigating. I hardly saw them except at meals. A hundred and fifty individuals living in a sort of collective isolation, we were both primitive and comfortable. We didn't even have the trouble of stretching out an arm to pick a banana, much less the trouble of cutting up a bison: the club which welcomed us had turned some pine planks into tables and put them next door to the kitchen.

The camp had a post office, or rather a post hut, but I never dreaded getting any bills as I had omitted to leave my address. There was a telephone – which left Juliette remarkably indifferent, and – best of all – there were showers fed by a mountain stream which came down through pipes heated by the sun. Being fed, lodged and washed, our insouciance must have considerably exceeded that of our prehistoric

ancestors. The water, for example, was so soft that Juliette's skin had never been so marvellously smooth.

'I should never have believed,' she said, 'that the tap water in Paris was so vile. Feel . . .'

I willingly felt.

'Swear to me,' said Juliette, 'that you won't ever again let me take a single bath in Paris water.'

'I'll buy you Evian water in barrels. Or better still a cistern of rose water.'

'Why not one of those machines . . . you know . . .'

No: I had finished with machinery.

'Feel again . . .'

I felt, but no, I wouldn't give in. In Paris I would be content with a corrugated wife.

Those blessed days! When I try to recapture them it seems they were made entirely of water, sun and stars. The camp slept. The first rays of the sun slid under the pine branches and came to drag us from our sleep. We emerged from our tent, alone. The breeze which, during the day, tempered the heat of Calvi bay, hadn't yet risen. Thirty paces in front of our tent, between the pines, the sea moved languorously. Four or five pines to the right and our bodies stretched themselves under the already warm shower. Then, still streaming from its caress, we walked together to plunge naked into the freshness of the lazy sea, dazzling in the slanting sunshine. The mountains in a crescent behind the pines, veiled their grey blue in a transparent mist. We abandoned ourselves, eyes shut, and it seemed that at last, in the silence of the dawn, we found our true selves. Then we walked along the straight ribbon of sand, we moved away from the pine wood where others soon would be waking up. We lay down in a hollow of the deserted dunes, and we made love.

During the day we had to slip on bikinis and restrain our poetic enthusiasm. We slept in the torpor of the afternoon,

saving ourselves for the night hours. Sometimes we fired our impatience by going to dance outside the Bar after dinner. Perched on planks which took the place of stools we saw, at the far end of the bay, the lights of Calvi twinkling. The coloured musicians – who at the beginning were from Katherine Dunham's troupe of Martiniques – had decorated their awning with branches of palm. The orchestra was not much blacker than the couples who assembled there. This was the only moment when we became conscious that other men and women lived in our pine wood. To rub shoulders with them always shocked us, like an improper word.

'It's extraordinary, isn't it?' said Juliette, 'all these people! Are they real?'

'Hardly, my darling! It must be a mistake.'

It seemed barely credible to us that their lives could have anything in common with ours, and we would have found it intolerable to think that their joy could be compared to the silent joy in which we lived. Lovers are alone in the world, as all the world knows.

Soon we left the searchlights for the dark brightness of the sky and the phosphorescent sea. We were only fully happy in solitude and nakedness. We swam, and our bodies stirred up sprays of light. The air and the water were of an equal mildness: we melted into them and that frustrating feeling of separateness, shared by all lovers, caused us no suffering for it seemed that we were only one person poured into two bodies. That again was a mistake, of course. But it pleased us enormously. That we were getting older, that Juliette's beauty would fall into disrepair, that life was imperceptibly leading our glory to decay, of this we never thought. If we had thought of it I am not sure whether we would have been saddened, so much in harmony with nature did we feel, joined by it one to the other.

The sand was cool beneath our stretched-out bodies. The

dying night breeze which had dried us, gave its last instructions to the calm messenger of dawn. I held Juliette close against me.

'I always knew,' she murmured, 'there was such a thing as happiness on earth.'

* * *

I had quite emphatically nothing to tell the readers of my paper. I telephoned to the editor and told him that happiness was absolutely indescribable and that I needed another eight days to study it. Perhaps I could sandwich in a human document as well? I had been told there was a Corsican bandit in the nearest maquis. If it wouldn't do as a feature perhaps it could be made into a comic strip, western style: the *Luxury Camp under the Terror of the Last of the Bandits*?

For this bandit was indeed the last. He was also an object of local veneration. He was eighty-six and had been in the maquis ever since his vendetta, which took place at the end of the last century. After him, one asked oneself anxiously, who was going to carry the torch? The problem was complicated by the fact that though an assassin could, if really necessary, be found, a victim had also to be recruited.

The good air, the height, the thyme and the rosemary had preserved his lungs in a perfect state of health. The villagers had been feeding him. However, what with old age coming on and in view of his being an historic monument, the National Tourists' Association had now taken over his upkeep.

Juliette and I plunged into the depths of the maquis to find him. In other words we took the camp delivery van to help us climb up to the village, the tower of which was the old bandit's hiding place. We arrived about three in the afternoon. The alleys were thick with men dressed in black stretched out in front of their doors. A startling sight which, if all of them had been struck down by an epidemic or by a

joint vendetta, would have made excellent material for an article. But they merely slept. A blinking bistro proprietor expressed his regrets. The bandit was having his siesta. Would I care, while waiting, to interview Lescati, the famous Marseilles gangster? This one wasn't in hiding, his official business being perfectly legal. He was here on a holiday visiting his family. And what is more he never did any killing himself, and always reluctantly. His business now? Well . . . it was something to do with women and drugs.

'So, there's no more killing then?' I asked him.

'Why, yes,' he said, 'but it's not like the good old days. Those who want to avenge their honour shoot from behind. Then they go quietly home. That's why there are no more bandits. Well now . . . may I take you to the gangster's house?'

But Juliette wasn't interested in a man who exploited women. She thought it despicable.

'And what about a man who is exploited by women?' I asked. 'What do you feel about him?'

'That sort of man,' said Juliette, 'is merely ridiculous.'

'I am curious to know where that puts me.'

'No honestly, darling! You take advantage of me, I take advantage of you . . . that's love.'

'Of a kind which makes me both despicable and ridiculous at the same time?'

'How much do you think I care what you are?' asked Juliette tenderly.

'All the same,' I replied, 'you've often told me I'm a poor specimen. If it were true . . .'

Juliette took the lobe of my ear between her thumb and forefinger and pulled gently. We had agreed on this as a sign to try and nip our quarrels in the bud.

'I'm tired,' she murmured lovingly. 'Suppose we do what the bandit's doing?'

The bistro owner courteously offered us a shady corner of his alley and we went to sleep on the flagstones. I didn't wake up till dusk. The sunbeams were fading off the bare walls that framed the tumbling hills, patched with olives and vines, like a narrow window. Far away the mountains, in a half-circle, held in the hollow of their pale hands the pearly light of the sea.

Juliette hadn't moved. Lying on her back, an arm and a leg slightly bent, she slept, her head fallen to one side onto the pavement, as much at ease in this alley as she would have been in bed. The dim light which was vanishing between the already black walls seemed to be held back only by her body. A villager in espadrilles slid silently and respectfully up to us, but the vibrations of his steps on the ground where Juliette's head was resting, troubled her sleep.

She was going to open her eyes. 'Every day of my life I will make you happy,' I suddenly swore to myself. Quite soon I realized I had taken this oath a trifle hastily. In a flash it assumed the form of a quiz. Should we stay up here all our lives; should we take to the maquis like the old bandit, and grow old gazing into one another's eyes? The Amorous Bandits . . . it sounded rather attractive. Yes, a pretty title for a feature in a sob story magazine. Or, on the other hand, should we go down again?

Juliette stretched, smiled, rolled towards me.

'How lovely it is,' she sighed. 'I'm a bit battered, all the same.'

'Then we'll go down again,' I said.

'And your old man?'

'He's too wise for us. Not everyone can be a kept bandit. And we shouldn't be able, like him, to stay permanently satisfied with looking at the stars. We'll go down again . . . and to Paris.'

'Oh!' cried Juliette. 'Not yet!'

'No, in a few days.'

'How silly,' said Juliette.

'You're not homesick for the Métro?'

'Not in the least.'

But perhaps I was: perhaps I wouldn't have decided so quickly on going back if I hadn't been drawn, without knowing it, by a cowardly need for the drugging excitement of city life.

'We should be in the swim,' I continued, 'splashing in the wake of the world. That is where we belong. Not lying down in the first field of flowers we see.'

'Why?' said Juliette.

I could find no answer.

'I'll go with you,' she continued, 'but it's completely idiotic . . .'

Our bistro owner came up the alley accompanied by a spry old man with a beard. I realized the paper would still get its story.

'Here is our bandit,' he explained with a nice smile. 'He wants to know if you're going back to Calvi. If so, might he have a lift in your van, as he wants to go to the cinema?'

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Seizing the Opportunity

WHEN we got home the chestnuts in the Champs-Élysées were already taking on their autumn colouring. At the end of September the Paris sky was tinted in the languid grey-rose hues of a Marquise's boudoir painted by Fragonard. And it sang. For me it sang with a sad and charming Mozartian voice, though I was less aware of the charm than I was of the sadness. That was due, no doubt, to the pile of bills, once forgotten but now drawing repeated attention to themselves. But after all, I had wanted it; I had wanted to come back to grapple with this sort of life, and for the joys of Calvi I tried to substitute modern comforts and a good conscience.

First of all I had to bring to an end my career as a debtor, which was becoming altogether too brilliant. I detailed for Juliette our two plans of attack. One must bring the money in – and at the faintest sign of journalistic game I was off like a shot – the other was to stop it going out.

This was the signal for war, a war between Juliette and me, and it lasted so long – I'm not sure it's finished even now – that I confuse the quarrels of that autumn with the brawls of the following winter and the summer after that and the next autumn. We were quick to forget happiness. And yet no! I wasn't beastly all the time: at least, it's hard for me to believe I was. Quite often I remembered I'd secretly promised to make Juliette happy. I told myself, in absolute honesty, that she only had to behave like other women, who somehow or other found happiness in the middle of their daily worries,

and I would do my bit too. Perhaps it was impossible, but it had to be attempted; life had to be faced. Anything else was cowardice.

To tell the truth, I didn't say this only to myself. I said it at some length to Juliette. And what did she answer? 'Long live cowardice!'

So then I elucidated once again, with husbandlike patience, my economic theory. For I had an economic theory. Juliette had none. She merely practised spending. At the start she thought she had squared the circle by accepting all invitations to dine out. She even scrounged for them. I protested. She said: 'The Dupont-Durands are impossible, but they always have five or six courses. If you eat all of them I won't need to give you luncheon tomorrow.'

Or else she quietly announced: 'Their cook is atrocious. You'll lose your appetite for two days.'

But it didn't take us long to see that people who don't repay hospitality are looked upon as spongers, and we were forced, in our turn, to invite back all the Dupont-Durands, thereby doubling both the expense and the boredom.

'I promise you,' I said to Juliette, 'you would do much better to learn to count.'

'There's only one thing that counts,' she retorted, 'and that's love.'

Working on this principle she had an irrepressible tendency to believe that something priced at 99 francs was infinitely cheaper than something marked 100 francs. And at the end of a discussion which left me panting, she declared:

'All right, it's nonsense. But it still doesn't alter the fact that it only costs 99 francs.'

Then I answered back and the argument continued on familiar lines.

'Always "it only costs"! But if you're waiting with your tongue hanging out for a Cadillac, you'll have to wait a long

time the way you're carrying on now! "It only costs 99 francs" . . . yes! But if you think that a thousand times a month, do you know how much that makes? Well, "it only costs" nearly a hundred thousand francs.'

'What a *rateau* you are,' said Juliette.

'I'm a what?'

'A *rateau*.' She added, condescendingly: 'That's a Swiss word which exactly describes you.'

'It doesn't mean a thing to me.'

'Well, perhaps this will,' continued Juliette. 'You're the most boring, vile, mean husband I have ever known. You're a miser!'

To which I replied that it was she who had made me so. If only she could manage to be a little more miserly, I wouldn't need to be. And each of us turned his back on the other, conscious of being in the right and only pausing long enough to regain sufficient strength to start again.

If this was love it was shaping very oddly. Of course, of course, I was in the wrong. Love was everything. All the rest was trifling. But was it my fault if I had got mesmerized by the importance of trifles, or was it Juliette's, who fed me with them to the point of nausea?

She was enthusiastic the day she discovered an ironmonger who gave gift vouchers for all purchases. At this period she would trip lightly off to do her shopping in the rue de Passy, dreaming of the profits she was going to make at the expense of the ironmonger; and thus she accumulated a collection of brooms, watering cans, picture hangers, moth killers and fly papers. When she came home pushing a wheelbarrow she explained to me that she had saved 135 francs. Unfortunately there was only a carpenter's outfit left in the shop for her to buy, and after that she would have to strike another golden seam to make money.

There were lottery tickets. Not that they were mere tickets to Juliette - to her they were fortunes, ready made.

'I know 'now,' she declared, 'that you've got a stingy, ungenerous character.'

After a particularly violent argument, in the course of which we vainly pinched each other's ears to make ourselves stop, she offered me, as a token of reconciliation, a scarf from Hermes. I liked it enormously. So did she, and it is she who wears it. This opened up new horizons to her. Since then, whenever she wants anything, she gives it to me. The method is not, unfortunately, valid for dresses, beauty preparations, powder compacts and other gew-gaws. In such cases she said (she still says):

'Tell me, do you like my new dress? Because I bought it entirely to please you.'

Sometimes – not nowadays, I must admit – there were two.

'You see,' she explained, 'I said to the saleswoman that this dress was too expensive, and so was this one. She was very accommodating. She said: "Take both of them and I'll make you a special price."' '

And as I didn't look as though I appreciated the saleswoman's kindness: 'I suppose you would prefer me to wear my old clothes reconditioned!'

'Exactly, darling. Because, you see, the fashion changes so quickly I have a job following it. In the spring it swelled round the hips and went down to the ankles. In the autumn it was the breasts which swelled and the hips which disappeared, the waist which went down and the skirts which went up again. So if you could have a dress made with a lot of material, preferably elastic . . .'

'I have never pretended, darling, that Christian Dior was within your means. Marie Louise has dug up a "little woman", and she's going to cut and contrive so that my old dresses will be unrecognizable. You'll see!'

And I saw. I saw a bill which Dior could well have signed.

'She's so clever! She unpicks everything and concocts an

entirely new dress – except for the stuff, of course. What? You're bored with this material? But, darling, you really must make up your mind what you do want!

'Pax!' I said. 'I want a wife well dressed for next to nothing. I want a "little woman" with little bills, tiny little bills . . .'

'That's exactly it, darling, she's so reasonable! I've taken her *all* my dresses to alter. It's been tremendously economical.'

Since then, whenever Juliette tells me about a 'little woman', I do everything in my power not to listen – not that I'm any more eager to hear of her relations with big ones – or men, for that matter.

'Fath told me I could buy everything I wanted at his Boutique and he would give me a thirty per cent reduction. That's good business, isn't it?'

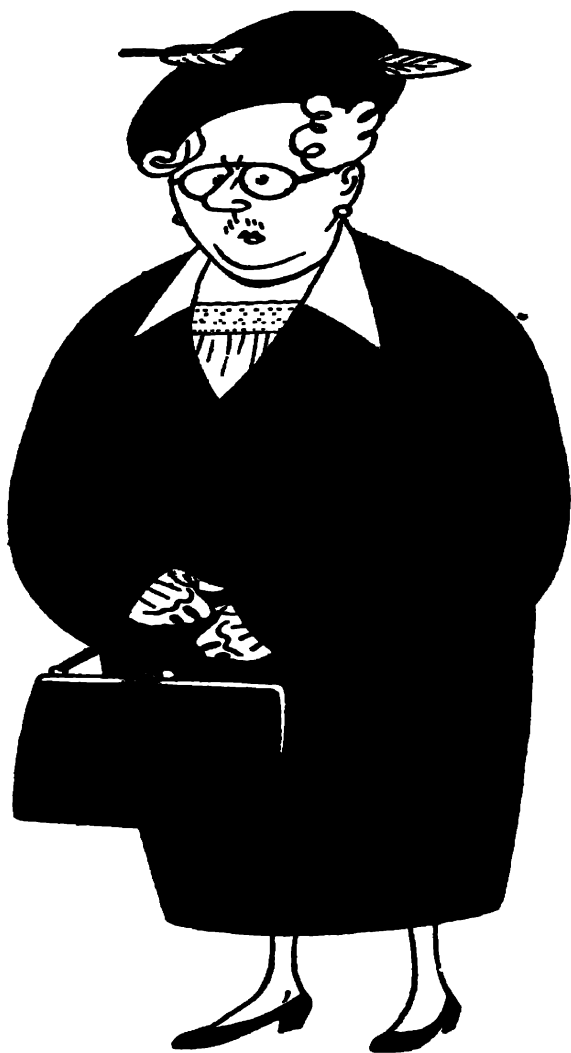
An irresistible piece of business. Think of it! The more she bought the more thirty per cents she got off.

I hadn't only to battle with Juliette, but also with myself. Certainly I too liked to see my wife looking elegant. And I turned the problem inside out. The preferential prices quoted in the big houses had scalded me and the 'little woman's' had given me the ague.

Now in the old days I had had certain dealings with mannequins, and I had kept in touch with one of them – in my dreams of course, and not often, not often at all – whose figure bore a remarkable resemblance to Juliette's. But I didn't know if I dared touch on this subject. In the end I risked it cautiously.

'Bravo!' said Juliette. 'Why couldn't you have thought of it sooner. She can lend me all her dresses; it's the ideal solution. A mannequin exactly like me? You're sure?'

'Absolutely sure, darling. Especially the hips and the waist. And the thighs. She has magnificent thighs.'



The Little Woman

'You shouldn't have let such a friendship drop,' said Juliette.

Her indifference was stupefying. Was it possible that she didn't love me any more?

'Her bust,' I continued, 'is perhaps a bit more firm than yours, if I remember rightly . . .'

'One forgets,' said Juliette, 'understandably.'

'I would have to see her again,' I said.

'Right then,' said Juliette, 'ask her in for a drink.'

Now I don't like my wife to be jealous. But I like it even less when she isn't.

'You're running no risk,' I observed. 'She is much too like you.'

'Are you being offensive?' inquired Juliette.

I insisted with a certain ponderousness: 'Not at all. I merely wanted to say that I like variety.'

'Ah?' said Juliette vaguely. 'I must run now; they're showing some dresses at . . .'

Suddenly she caught me by the tie and shook me roughly.

'What does all that mean?' she cried.

'What?'

'I like variety. Don't play the idiot with me. So you're deceiving me?'

Inwardly I gave a sigh of relief. Outwardly I screamed just as loudly as Juliette. In situations like this Tyrant, now growing, had taken to the habit of intervening. He would bark – louder than we did – and bite our calves. He bit. We pinched each other's ears alternately for a quarter of an hour until peace was re-established. There was nothing left for me to do but crunch a coffee bean and kiss her.

'In short,' said Juliette tenderly, 'you wanted to make me believe I'd immunized you against all women?'

'Exactly.'

'You want me to believe that?'

'But yes . . .'

She looked at me. There must have been an outsize photographer's bird on my head, because she didn't seem to be able to restrain her giggles.

'Well then!' she said, 'I believe it.'

The giggles increased to roars of laughter, and as I wasn't laughing she pulled my nose.

The result was that Juliette and Fussy, the mannequin, became friends. Unfortunately for me she could only lend her evening dresses and Juliette announced:

'She's ~~a~~ dear, you know. She lends me the models of her afternoon dresses over the week-ends, and my "little woman" has only got to copy them.'

This is how she got, for half price, some very pretty town and cocktail ensembles and some ravishing dinner dresses. Of course, she didn't absolutely need them. In fact she didn't need them at all. She admitted it herself.

'They give me ideas,' she sighed.

Not that she'd ever been short of ideas, although I must admit that if I hadn't had one or two myself she would never have thought of ordering all those useless dresses.

'Useless?' protested Juliette. 'But you're completely mad! Don't you know the more you have the less worn they get? I promise you if I had a lot of money I could economize like anything.'

'You think one must be rich to live cheaply?'

'It's plain as a pikestaff, darling.' And she concluded, victoriously: 'Anyway it was a lovely opportunity to pick up bargains.'

* * *

Such an opportunity often disguises itself under a special name: The Sales. I developed a seasonal dread of sales. I say 'seasonal', but it strikes me that sales are always in season as

far as shops are concerned, as long as they've got a job-lot to dispose of. And what smart woman needs the excuse of the time of year? She can make her husband swallow sales from January 1st to December 31st: 'But, darling - such bargains!'

I was very annoyed, because I couldn't send bargains to the devil: they figured largely in my economic theory under the heading 'The Right Technique for Doing One's Shopping'. I had clearly explained it to Juliette, setting forth the broad lines of the system in precise terms.

'When you go shopping, no preconceived ideas. Suppleness, alertness and a lively eye. Let us suppose you had decided to buy some artichokes. You establish the fact that asparagus is cheaper. What do you do?'

'Buy some sardines,' said Juliette.

'Why, in heaven's name?'

'Because you annoy me,' said Juliette.

'But still, have you understood . . .?'

'Oh!' interrupted Juliette, 'I see very well what you mean.'

A short time after that she went off to buy a travelling case and came back with a pair of shoes.

'My God!' I groaned, 'you've got at least a dozen pairs already.'

'Yes,' she said, tapping me on the chin, 'but I hadn't any preconceived ideas.'

I was wrong to grumble, she said: a less reasonable woman would have 'seized the opportunity' to order a dress, a hat, a bag and an assortment of gloves to go with the new shoes.

'I can wait for those,' said Juliette sweetly, 'you have quite enough worry without me adding to it. Look, I found this in the letter-box.'

It was a bill which fell due regularly.

'What is it?' asked Juliette. 'Nothing bad?'

'Nothing new in any case.'

I made a rapid calculation.

'It's only that in a month my bank account will be as dry as the Gobi desert.'

'But then I'm completely off my head!' wailed Juliette. 'Oh, but I'm a criminal!'

Juliette passes from one extreme to the other with disconcerting speed. I try to follow her leaps, but it is a tiring sport.

'Listen,' I said to her, 'this can't go on. I don't blame you, because you've never been taught, but the fact remains that you're incapable of managing everyday life.'

She leapt up. 'You dare,' she began, 'you dare . . . to me . . . to me who . . .'

'To you who what?' I said coldly.

'To me who . . . Did you know I saved a child from an aeroplane accident? The undercarriage got stuck and we turned turtle.'

'I know,' I said. 'At Marignane.'

She had thrown this child in my face twenty times when I was talking to her about the price of carrots.

'I even know,' I continued, 'that everyone got out of the plane, that the plane might have caught fire, and that the mother had forgotten her child. You rushed to rescue it, so violently that it was the only one that got hurt. Was it its arm or its leg you broke for it?'

'All the same, if the plane had caught fire . . .'

'You would never have crossed my path and I would never have married you.'

Juliette's voice changed. 'You hate me, don't you?'

I should have taken her in my arms. For some women this is the most effective argument.

'Leave out the emotional scenes,' I answered. 'Being a woman is also a job. Are you going to learn it, yes or no?'

'It's not for you to teach me!' shouted Juliette.

'For once,' I told her, 'you're right.' I added darkly: 'It seems I've failed.'

And then she had to smile . . . and say, 'All the same, you know, you are rather a poppet,' . . . and down went my defences.

'Listen,' I said in a sudden access of tenderness, 'what about going shopping together today?'

* * *

We went off with a shopping basket. She had compiled a list of what we wanted for luncheon.

'You do the buying,' said Juliette, adding cunningly: 'I learn better, looking.'

I felt flattered. 'Oh, it only needs a little commonsense,' I said.

On the way I studied the list, paying particular attention to the basic essentials. I read fruit (apples, oranges, bananas) – camembert – salad – leg of mutton – beans. I strode twice along the length of the rue de Passy, noting with care the prices in the shops and on the stalls. Juliette dawdled after me. The leg of mutton seemed to me to be ruinous. All the more ruinous because I only like it with broad beans. It's an old subject of discord.

'You see,' I pointed out sententiously, 'a leg of mutton isn't really suitable for a household of three. Nature in her wisdom takes a broader view. That's why sheep have legs designed for families of standard type, between three and five children.'

'Ah,' said Juliette. 'I read that some Russian biologists had produced sheep as big as calves. They are for big families I suppose?'

'Big families, darling, rarely have the money to buy legs of mutton. But I'd be grateful if you didn't disturb my musings.'

'All this doesn't prevent me from liking leg of mutton,' said Juliette.

'With broad beans.'

‘With peas.’

In a spirit of conciliation I crossed out the leg of mutton.

‘You’d do better,’ I said to her, ‘to watch what I’m doing.’

I showed her the list.

‘Well, I never!’ said Juliette. ‘Why have you added cod, roquefort and cabbages?’

‘Bargains,’ I said. ‘Not your sort, which are just excuses for spending money. My sort of bargains are . . . well, bargains. Cod is dirt cheap today.’

‘I see,’ said Juliette. And she said nothing more.

I bought the whole cod and a roquefort cheese barely broached, which the dairy woman sold me at wholesale price. As for the cabbages, they were green and certainly full of vitamins, so they would take the place of the fruit, as I explained to Juliette while I piled them into the shopping basket. They were also a bargain. And I joyfully crossed out all the rest of the things Juliette had written in her list.

‘There,’ I said, ‘I think our shopping is done.’

‘Good,’ said Juliette soberly.

I don’t at all mind cabbage raw with vinegar sauce. I can bear it cooked. But it is less good reheated. Especially on the sixth day. Cod, on the other hand, can, with a little goodwill, be cooked in seven or eight different ways. I cannot believe it was necessary for Juliette to serve it with a white sauce during the entire week. But it amused her to make me swallow my shopping, as much as it upset me. I hadn’t seen her in such a good temper for ages. She sang without stopping and that upset me even more. If she saw me sitting in a corner, trying to digest my humiliation and the cod, she came and ruffled my hair, spun round merrily and went off. Sometimes she even whistled. I sought consolation in alcohol, which I am told gently kills people who are not in too much of a hurry to die.

One day, without warning, she sat on the arm of my chair

and whispered in my ear: 'Do you remember Calvi? Wouldn't you like to go back there?'

'White sauce . . .' I muttered. 'Raw cabbage, cooked cabbage . . .' I laughed derisively. 'You cod . . . !'

I fell back into the chair. She has told me I had a weird and haggard look and that I was beginning to string words together which were, as far as she could see, devoid of all meaning. I was stringing them in an insulting voice, too.

'Fly papers!' I announced. 'Drying machine! Wheelbarrow! Galantine! Female! Will you take this woman . . . ha! ha! ha!'

I leaped into the middle of the floor and yelled with considerable over-emphasis: 'And what did he take, the husband?'

'To the bottle,' observed Juliette quietly.

'Wrong,' I said. 'Sophist!'

'Do you love me?' said Juliette.

As the walls and the furniture were starting to turn turtle I returned to the nearest armchair before giving the question my attention.

'Do you love me?' repeated Juliette.

I was not in a condition to answer. Not that it would have made any difference if I had been. Juliette has the habit of asking the same question several times, however idle it may be. Sometimes I answer her, sometimes I don't. But it doesn't matter: it isn't so much to the answer but to the question that she attaches importance.

'Do you love me?'

I considered this assiduously.

'You . . .' I stammered thickly, 'you're . . . incompetent!'

My eyes absolutely insisted on shutting themselves. They shut and Juliette appeared before them sitting in a wheelbarrow. Someone was pushing it. It was me, of course. It was a great strain on my arms, because Juliette was throwing kisses to the tradespeople, and all of them were piling cod on

to her lap. 'Thank you, thank you, my friends,' she said, 'thank you on his behalf, he likes it in white sauce.' The tradesmen cried: 'Take them all! It's only love which counts!'

Something pinched my neck. I opened my eyes and felt Juliette's hand. She shook me with affectionate roughness.

'You poor fish!' she said, 'it's only love that counts.'

She took my ears and kneaded them into rissoles.

'Exactly,' I murmured. 'I was just saying so to myself . . .'

'My clever one!' said Juliette. She added as an afterthought: 'Hope springs eternal.' And she pulled my nose. It was becoming a habit.

'I'm going to put everything right,' said Juliette. 'Have faith in me.'

CHAPTER TWELVE

Room to Let

JULIETTE had told me she would find a way of bringing money into the house. I had replied yes, yes, because one mustn't discourage goodwill, but I didn't believe her. When I went away for a few days on a reporting job in Switzerland she had announced to me, on saying good-bye: 'I've had an idea. Let me work on it. You'll see, you'll see!'

When Juliette promises me a surprise I don't know why but I always get cramp in the stomach. So I took Emilienne on one side.

'Look after Madame,' I told her. 'If she wants to do anything, try and stop her.'

Emilienne had come to us after our holidays and she was still with us because she had what she described as 'moods'. There is nothing Juliette appreciates more than moods. She is an epicure. Emilienne wept on her shoulder when she wasn't weeping into the sauces, and enjoyed her bouts of melancholia as much as others enjoy going to the cinema. Up till then she had interested neither man nor beast, but Madame – *she* understood.

The house could have done, perhaps, without Emilienne's clumsiness, but it is difficult to have a turbulent soul and precise gestures at the same time. Still, as Juliette hadn't lost that curious mania for bursting out laughing whenever something got broken – and she laughed all the louder the more furious I got – there was enough gaiety about to compensate. I believe Juliette was grateful to Emilienne for being a

superior breaker to her. My wife took on the air of a level-headed and reasonable human being in comparison with our temperamental maid. I forgot to mention that Emilienne subscribed to a spiritualist society. She hadn't yet succeeded in turning tables, being satisfied, provisionally, in making them and what was on them waltz as she did the housework.

* * *

In Switzerland there lived a King. Indeed there was quite a number of them enjoying a salubrious exile. (At the beginning of the century it had been anarchists who sought refuge there.) As I was saying, in Switzerland there lived a King, and he started to get talked about. He had decided he would like to sit on his throne again. Half his subjects thought it was a good idea, the other half thought the Swiss air suited him. This was quite enough for me to be sent to get an interview, accompanied by a photographer.

To tell the truth I was on the way to becoming a specialist on crowned heads. In the spring of that year, when Juliette's relentless femininity had so exasperated M. Belhomme, my paper had assigned me to 'cover' Princess Elizabeth during her ceremonial excursions across Paris. I had crossed Her Royal Highness's path so often that she finished by noticing me. I confess this in all modesty for I still don't know if she took me for a city policeman or a poor relation - I have a look of the English royal family when I'm dressed up as a sailor, though a little more sprightly. Even the police got used to my face; at least that's what I suppose. Otherwise I can think of no reason, save punishable negligence, why they allowed me to lunch intimately with the Princess at Barbizon.

That was a wonderful scoop! There were seven numbered tables in the inn's private dining-room, one for the Princess and her friends, the others for the police, mayors and a half dozen high-up officials. In all about twenty people approved

by Police Headquarters because – as the Parisians recalled, their regiments lined up along the pavements – they were afraid the Princess might meet the same fate as the King of Yugoslavia.

I coolly invited myself to one of these tables and the police were completely hoodwinked. At least, they were suspicious, but their suspicions were misdirected, though between the *crêpes flambées au Grand Marnier* and the *petits fours*, they gave me one of the biggest frights of my career. I had noticed that four policemen sitting at a table near the door was discussing me. I know you will believe me when I say I suffered, and not entirely from modesty. Suddenly I saw one of them get up and come towards me across the room. In a moment I would be scruffed by the neck – in the middle of so distinguished a company – made ridiculous in all the Press – it gave me a proper ‘turn’. But the most fanciful policeman could not imagine the entry of an unauthorized person to such a gathering. My hand alone intrigued him. It was in my pocket, a little clenched it is true, but not on the butt of a revolver. Having seen me take out my handkerchief, soaked with perspiration I may say, the policeman returned to his seat, perfectly satisfied.

Hadn’t I deserved a few royal words? Alas, alas! The Princess never said a thing to me. I could have killed her . . . my God, what am I saying . . . I must be crazy! And I started out talking about another King anyway, didn’t I? . . . ah! . . . yes.

Well, he was a much simpler proposition. He got the hang of the publicity racket at once, and very obligingly undressed five times in twenty minutes so that I could have him photographed as a King, a General, a Corporal, a Business Man and just a Man.

This happened at Lausanne. I love Lausanne. I was to return there the following year when Rita Hayworth was



The publicity racket

getting ready to make the Aga Khan a grandfather. We were all overcome with emotion to think we should have the privilege of telling the world about Rita's little Khan.

But I am anticipating – I'm straying again. Not all that much, though. What I am getting at is that my reports on royalty and glamour began to bring me in a big mail from my readers – of both sexes – and that I soon hit on the idea that this mail might be turned into something profitable.

The first letters were not easy to answer.

'I enclose a stamped addressed envelope and this advertisement: "Gentleman seeks young lady, up to thirty years of age; children no objection." I fulfil these requirements having, owing to two foolish lapses, two little treasures aged three and five years. More than anything I long for the union of two hearts and minds. Am I asking too much of this gentleman?' She had signed herself: 'Love bird.' And given her address.

The problems of 'a Berichonne with green eyes' were no simpler.

'I live in a little town where no one has any fun and where a reputation is quickly tarnished. Will you correspond with me in my loneliness? Tell me if one can compel someone to fall in love with one.'

As the 'Berichonne with the green eyes' had also put in a stamped envelope I wrote her something on these lines: 'Re your esteemed letter of the 14th inst. I have the honour to inform you that, on the latest information available, love cannot be compelled.' That didn't discourage her from writing to me again. And the idea took root in my mind that the heart is a perfect mine of postage stamps.

And why stick to postage stamps, which cost so little? Why not give free consultations with 100 francs for expenses? Or 500 francs if it was a rich mendicant, or 1000 francs for the lonely with hearts of gold? I let the project simmer while we

returned, the photographer and I, with our King in the bag.



But Juliette was waiting for me with a project of her own, and this one wasn't at all badly conceived. In fact I felt sure Emilienne must have had a hand in it because really, it was such an astonishing Juliette who suddenly revealed herself. But I found, oddly enough, I liked her better extravagant than greedy. Moreover she herself didn't much like her new role, because she led up to things with care.

I was resting my slippered feet upon the hearth. Emilienne had gone up to bed and I was trying to read a novel in which the hero became as enmeshed in calamities as a fly in honey, when Juliette announced:

'By the way, do you know the old trout in No. 17 has let a room in her flat?'

'Good,' I replied, 'I can see nothing in that to which I could take exception. It's even a fine gesture. She's averting the housing crisis. Now please let me decode this tripe.'

I plunged back into the calamities, but there was something that didn't fit – and not only in the book. I could *feel* my Juliette in her chair; she was having an idea.

'I've had an idea,' said Juliette.

'Oh Lord,' I said, looking for the thread of the story on the following page.

'We're going to let a room.'

This time I put my book down on my knees but didn't breathe a word. She got up and began to pace the floor.

'You explained to me, didn't you, when we had to pay the last instalment, that the rent of our house was exorbitant?'

'Not at all. I simply stated that it wasn't to be sniffed at.'

'Don't quibble. You even added that though the rent was exorbitant it wasn't, even so, exorbitant enough to incite people to build.'

'Low rents, it's obvious, are the cause of the crisis in . . .'

'Let me go on. Well, we're going to stave off the crisis by exploiting a young girl, a spinster, a young couple or a widow. Which do you prefer?'

I raised my arms and gaped.

'Stop it,' said Juliette. 'Briefly, I want a tenant. I want a rent and a good conscience. Don't interrupt. I thought at first of your two little office rooms in the attic. Don't protest all the time! Then of the maid's room. But it would be much too good for someone we don't know. Or there's the room next to ours, only it would need furnishing, and of course I wouldn't dream of spending a penny on people like that – you agree I expect? Good. So I shall put a divan in the boxroom.'

'But it's microscopic! How in the hell . . .'

'A very tiny divan, of course, or otherwise one couldn't get in. You're right, darling. All the same I'll buy a jug and basin, because I suppose it would be nicer if they washed. Now don't get in a flap as I'm certainly not going to supply towels. Or sheets for that matter. Nothing but a blanket. No, I'll go as far as an eiderdown because there's no heating in that room.'

'Perhaps you could lend them our little electric heater?'

'Don't be idiotic. The room isn't cold, it looks out onto the lift shaft. You'll tell me it never gets the sun. But it's sheltered from the wind. Indeed it has remarkably little air.'

I didn't dare believe she was speaking seriously.

'It seems,' I said, in a jocular tone, 'that my Juliette has been drinking vulture's blood.'

'Do you, yes or no, want us to have a comfortable life? Then shut up about our little electric heater. Which reminds me I shall forbid all cooking by electricity. I've no wish to pay electricity bills for this . . . this person. No radio either; it's extravagant and noisy. What's more, I'll cut off the meter.'

'And what do we do? Use a nightlight?'

'Ah!' she sighed. 'Well then we'll give him back his current when night falls. Unless of course we let to a night watchman - but that would be too lucky!'

Suddenly she pointed an outraged finger at me.

'The key! Should we . . . ? No, he must be in by ten if he doesn't want to stay on the street, or else sleep out. He's sure to be used to it, and anyway I won't give the key of our house to a stranger.'

'If he's not a tramp when he comes, he will be by the time you're through with him.'

But Juliette was in no mood for joking.

'Well,' I said to her, 'your project seems to conform to the usual pattern. How much are you going to ask?'

'Oh,' she said, 'I don't want to be more exacting than the others. How much do you pay for the house? Fifty thousand? Let's see . . . six thousand a month makes seventy-two thousand. One must make a little profit when one puts oneself out. Though if you want my opinion I think we should be fools to put ourselves out more than an inch.'

* * *

I was rather aghast at the lengths to which Juliette had taken my domestic advice. When I think of it now, I wonder whether she would, in fact, have been capable of extorting money from her widower as she promised. Perhaps . . . it isn't for me to swear that this woman doesn't know how to be cruel. And yet what I really dreaded was exactly the opposite; to see, one day, a tenant coddled at my expense.

'That's fine,' said Juliette. 'The only time I try to get our budget in better shape you squash me. You've only yourself to thank if you stay second-rate.'

'Me, second-rate? Me, to whom women write from every part of the country?'

'Poor old thing,' said Juliette, 'have you gone off the rails?'

'Me gone off the rails?'

'What do you imagine these women want from you?'

I took my time. I stared at her, steadily.

'Advice. They want advice from me.'

Juliette also took her time. Then she started to laugh, and to laugh . . . as though she were gargling with a whistle.

'I don't want to know,' I said coldly, 'what you find so damned'comic about that. But not later than tomorrow I'm setting up as a psychological advice bureau. In the service of the heart.'

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Heart Specialist

THERE were the rebellious, the pathetic, the vulnerable and the fantastic, the mad, the refractory . . .

How lonely women are! In three months I collected a battalion of bruised hearts, and enough money to pay the bills for our domestic robots, the loan for our premium, and even several of Juliette's bargains.

To begin with I wrote a personal letter to all those who had spontaneously elected me as their adviser simply because I'd seen Ingrid Bergman and Tino Rossi close to. As soon as I had put advertisements in the sentimental magazines they produced a tidal wave which nearly drove me mad. But Juliette wasn't driven mad. She wisely made me see that the needs of the human heart could be lumped into categories, and that one didn't need so very many of these either. We could get away with a mere dozen.

I say 'we' because Juliette had offered her services as a secretary, and I must admit that in matters of the heart she is very competent.

If you think that I, in a disgracefully offhand manner, exploited my clients' misfortunes, you are mistaken. First, because these women were all exhibitionists. Second, because I gave them something for their money. The complete treatment consisted of psychology, morphology, graphology, astrology, beauty hints, gymnastics, dieting, weights and measures and psychoanalysis. The results were frequently startling. I have testimonials to this effect, like all charlatans.

They wrote under pseudonyms. This was already a useful psychoanalytical indication.

'Dear Sir, I admit without shame that I once earned my living on the streets. And then I met the man who became my one and only passion. Unfortunately he is of delicate health and what with tonics and one thing and another I can no longer make ends meet. I am still sufficiently attractive to find a man to keep me and my husband, but the idea of sharing my attractions repels me. And so I wonder if it would not be better for me to take up my old profession again. Advise me.' She called herself *Sea Breeze*, an evident sign of her love for the open air.

This one was from a man. 'She said she was free and independent. I suggested she should live with me for a few days. How can you explain the falseness of women? She was a virgin.' *Loveless*.

'I am affectionate, modest, shy and muscular. I am only 48 round the waist, but I have a moustache and I am in despair. Can you tell me of a scientific method for the removal of superfluous hair? I must also tell you that I am going bald. Life is very perverse. But I won't ask you if there is a remedy for baldness. There cannot be or there wouldn't be so many bald people. Tell me about my moustache, please, and leave the rest.' *Sour grapes*.

'I am engaged to a boy and we are supposed to be getting married. I saw in a dream I was no longer a virgin, and at first it surprised me enormously, and then I was told that some girls are born that way. I am afraid. If this is my trouble . . . How do I know exactly? Help me! Or should I tell him everything? But what? He would never believe me. Isn't it true that a young girl can flirt with several men and yet be serious, if she does it in a healthy-minded way? I thought I had never gone too far, even during the maddest moments, but now I am doubtful.' *Tormented*.

'Tied down' to a shabby life in a small town, and despising the beauty, elegance and good fortune of all vain and idle women, I have employed my enforced leisure in teaching myself the best way to understand and serve The One who would one day love me. In all modesty I may say that now, having reached the age of forty-two, I am a cultivated woman. But I itch. Could you tell me of a calming and purifying lotion?' *Symphony*. 'P.S. I've read that Michèle Morgan uses Lux. Is that a good idea? S.'

This one wanted to change her nose, that one complained about her breasts and enclosed a sketch to illustrate in what a humiliating position they were situated. You must admit I suffered a lot.

I suffered even more the day Juliette submitted for my judgement the following letter. I read it and it seemed as if the complaints of this young unknown woman awoke in me a sort of fury against the boorishness of men, and in particular against the one she mentioned.

'We were married during the intoxicating days of our youth. He was affectionate, anxious to please, a little silly towards evening. In short an ideal fiancé. Rough at times, but I did not mind that much. Gay too, though tending a bit to caddishness, but I told myself he was showing off. Men like us to take them for toughs – it is the cinema's fault. We were married, and then the reproaches began. I have had a modern education; my parents made me go to a secretarial college, I can do shorthand, typing, English, and I am strong in French. Of course on mending and cooking I admit I am on the simple side. But that's normal, isn't it, when one lives in the 20th century? But then, to hide nothing from you, I don't think my husband is normal. He says when two people love they speak a language without words. Result: never a kind word. Weeks pass when I am no more real to him than his dog. And then when the cup I bear is about to overflow

with my tears he suddenly reawakens and loves me again with long whole words. We become human beings again. Then there is a relapse and there I am, a stranger once more. He says he must have peace and quiet. If I kiss him he hasn't time. Can you understand this? And yet we would understand each other very well, if only we talked.'

'Poor woman!' I sighed. 'Her letter is distinctly above the average.'

'Isn't it?' said Juliette. 'I thought she would interest you. And what is your diagnosis?'

'Wait,' I said. 'The writing is fairly elementary – with some neuropathic tendencies which perhaps explain the situation. In any case they explain the tone, don't you think? But it's very touching, this letter. Don't you think so? Surely this poor girl can't leave you cold? Married to a brute who neglects her, who never says he loves her . . . but that's indispensable! . . . who never takes her in his arms except when he happens to remember she's pretty? For I'm sure she is pretty, that's one of those things one can feel.'

'You must,' said Juliette, 'have antennae.'

'Oh well it's my job,' I answered modestly. 'One isn't a heart specialist for nothing. I really feel sorry for this woman. I shall write and ask her to come and see me.'

'Oh no!' cried Juliette. 'If you start having your clients to see you I won't play. Particularly this one.'

'I'll do as I wish!' I shouted.

'If that woman comes in here,' cried Juliette, 'I go out.'

'Go,' I answered. 'I don't need you to tell her what I think of her husband.'

'Ah?' said Juliette with lively interest. 'And what do you think of her husband?'

'I think he is an egoist, and a narrow-minded beast as well. And as she loves him and she is ravishing, the answer is plain.'

'Meaning?'

'She should send him to the devil and look for another man.'

'Bravo!' said Juliette. And she added with a sly smile: 'How much do I owe you for this consultation?'

For needless to say she had written it herself – and said I ought to congratulate her! – getting Emilienne to copy it for her to make it look authentic.

This put her in good humour for a week. Even today, when a drawing-room conversation needs enlivening, she cites this example of my exceptional perspicuity.

I fear that my clients suffered from Juliette's imposture. For if I didn't take them seriously before, at any rate I had a certain respect for myself as a psychological adviser. But this let-down, after so many others, shook me so much that I tended more and more to consider life as one big hoax. And if life and I were ever going to be reconciled, it would not be through my clients' letters. I continued my work, but with a bitterness beyond my years.

'Two months ago a wretch stole from me the man I love. As I cannot run after them, being married and a mother of five children, I am using the radio-active scent which holds, even from a distance, the unswerving affection of him one loves. But my husband dislikes the smell and threatens also to leave me. I am in grave distress.' *Poor human flower.*

'Isn't it the man's fault? I have been simulating pleasure ever since our marriage, and even before that, and I do so want to know exactly what the pleasure I am simulating is like. I cannot sublimate my feelings and I suffer. But I am sure you will understand me.' *The Ember.*

'Twenty-eight years of marriage. My husband has always done the scrubbing, believing that it was too hard work for a woman. I have a new neighbour who says he must be effeminate even though he weighs a hundred kilogs. I had never thought of it. Do you agree?' *Obsession.*

'At 15 I was taken advantage of by a friend. He was the

first to gratify my senses. I loved him passionately. Alas! He did not know how to cultivate this rare and delicate plant. Neither have other men, and though still passionate I am prematurely faded. I know one can never find true happiness twice. I am 17.' *Nude*.

I answered them by letter No. 6, or by the variation of No. 7 and assured them of my perfect understanding. At the next stage, in return for two photographs, front and profile, I explained to them the rudiments of their souls. This was of inestimable value to them. To me too. I fixed the price to go with the face, following the example of fortune-tellers and psychoanalysts.

To tell the truth it was my only made-to-measure work. The rest of the treatment, the gymnastics, astrology, beauty culture and so on we dished out in fixed formulas. Moral Counsel, Conscience Cases, and Human Problems all had their files, and we crowned all with a Psychoanalytical Synthesis which never failed to please. Our patients were dazzled by its mysterious light in which they wallowed their libidos and Oedipus Complexes.

Everybody was well content, including my creditors. Towards March I had more or less restored the situation. And I should have considered myself a psychological adviser of the first water if I had been able to solve, with equal 'brio' the 'human problem' which called itself Juliette.

Once again, alas, we found ourselves expressing widely divergent points of view. On the subject of debts for example. She reckoned they were a sign of prosperity because, she said, no one lends to the poor. I answered: 'Who pays his debts waxes fat.' Obviously one or other of us was wrong, otherwise, by dint of borrowing and spending, we should have been millionaires.

Towards the end of the winter she began to urge me on various occasions to try and economize. It was so unjust I was

immediately suspicious of some ulterior motive. But after several sighs bearing on the subject of her friend Marie Louise who was amusing herself at Chamonix, and the snow at Mégève which was powdery, there was no room left for suspicions. As always the attack unrolled itself after dinner, at that hour when love and the desire to sleep, half and half, make a husband vulnerable.

* * *

I was drowsing on the sofa after a hard psychological day. She came and lay beside me with the sweetness of an angel, and leaning her head on my shoulder said:

'Darling, these winter sports . . . aren't we going to talk of them again?'

'Ah?' I replied, rubbing my eyes. 'Have *we* ever talked about them?'

She sighed: 'It's always the same. I put my faith in you . . . I dream, I hope, and then . . .'

'Well, you're mistaken,' I answered. 'I have been thinking about winter sports. I've been thinking about them a great deal. I've calculated . . .'

'Then that's that,' she said, stiffening. 'And today too, when I've just seen a ravishing "after-skiing" outfit.'

'Excuse me,' I interrupted, 'but were we going for the skiing or for what comes after skiing?'

'Don't be ridiculous. Obviously, if I want to go to the mountains it's because I want to get tanned.'

I allowed myself a derisive laugh.

She serenely continued: 'But you know how it is! At winter sports people can't help finding themselves in bars. You don't imagine I'm going to spend the evenings sitting in a hotel lounge waiting for dinner and just doing nothing?'

'Oh!' I began in an uncertain voice, 'you would find something to do.'

I took a deep breath, and putting my arm round her shoulders said: 'You could knit.'

There was a deplorable silence. She said, with false gentleness: 'Knit.'

'I would help with winding the wool, my love. Or I've another idea! I've calculated . . .'

'Stop calculating,' she said, 'or I'll scream!'

' . . . that if we rented a chalet in the mountains and looked after ourselves . . .'

'If I did, you mean!' She had gone to the far end of the sofa.

' . . . it wouldn't be too terribly expensive. You see, what I like about the mountains is the height, the wide views, the wind, the sun, the solitude. It's these that make a real holiday for me.'

'For you, yes. But you haven't bothered to think for an instant that a real holiday for a woman consists first of all in having no housework to do! A fat lot you care whether I have a holiday!'

I had always believed I wasn't as selfish as other men. Me, I had finer feelings. I was an ideal husband.

'Don't cry,' I said. 'We'll go to a hotel; to a little hotel.'

'Of course. I never asked you to take me to a palace. What would be the use anyway? I wouldn't have anything to wear.'

'Well then, let's talk of it no more.'

We stayed for a moment, dreaming, each in his corner. Suddenly she said: 'But you must agree that evenings are long in the mountains and that everyone goes to the bar?'

'I'm not a tyrant, am I? I wouldn't refuse you a drink or two.'

'Thank you very much,' she said. 'You've always been so good to me. Only, I'd need some skiing trousers for the bar. An "after-skiing outfit" in fact! Incidentally, I've calculated . . . me too!'

At this move I realized the worst was still to come.

'Think of it! I'll need a windcheater, two or three flannel shirts, a sweater, some trousers, boots. Some woollen socks as well. And some mittens. And a few scarves. Just think of that!'

'I've thought of it,' I murmured.

She had unconsciously drawn nearer to me and was stroking my hand.

'You see,' she concluded, 'the after-skiing outfit wouldn't make an appreciable difference to the total.'

'I've thought of it,' I repeated with a certain obstinacy. 'As for the boots, Catherine's . . .'

'Useless, they're too small.'

'They'll stick on your feet all the better. And Brigitte's?'

'Size 40!'

'Perfect. You can wear three pairs of socks. And for the skiing pants, hasn't your friend Marie-Louise . . . ?'

'Don't you know that they have to be moulded to the figure, at the same time allowing for every sort of movement including a full court curtsy?'

'You're talking just like a magazine.'

'Cad,' she said.

'As for me,' I continued, 'I thought my old shooting trousers and my military boots would be just the thing . . . that is if we were going to a chalet.'

'They were cabbage green,' she said.

'What?'

'The after-skiing trousers. And there were shoes which went with the trousers. Everything green.'

'But I'm not so green, my love. Listen, I'll arrange everything. You shall have a quiet week in an hotel, without a care, I promise you. Way up high, where the air is fresh.'

'Yes,' she said, tapping me on the chin. 'At Garches,* for example, on the slopes of St Cucufa.'

*Garches is a suburb of Paris. *Tr.*

I got up, irritated.

'Next year,' I told her, 'if I'm still reaping a harvest of broken hearts I'll give you a whole panoply of ski-suits. Will that satisfy you?'

'With you,' said Juliette, 'happiness is always tomorrow.'

'You ought to be careful,' I answered. 'You're beginning to talk like a Lonely Heart.'

'It's contagious,' said Juliette. 'I feel extremely psychological.'

'Obsession,' I replied. 'Lady Carlton, Blue Angel. Mimosa from Limousin. Come to my arms you Poor Human Flower!'

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Man on the Ceiling

WE had still not gone winter sporting, and it became the end of March – which reminded me of an event of considerable importance. I secretly decided to celebrate it with a wonderful present – and no ill feelings.

‘I bet,’ said Juliette on the day, ‘that you’ve forgotten this is our wedding anniversary!’

‘I bet I haven’t!’ I answered cheerfully. ‘A year of marriage, to you, my lovely, is something one doesn’t overlook!’

‘I’ve a surprise for you,’ she continued.

I felt as if my spinal chord was twisting into a corkscrew.

‘You’ve got a surprise for me?’ I repeated apprehensively.

‘Don’t sound so dreadfully over-excited,’ said Juliette.

‘It’s only . . . that I’ve got a surprise for you.’

‘No . . . ?’ she cried. ‘My poor darling, you really aren’t nearly as horrid as you look! Show me quickly.’

‘No, you.’

‘No, you first.’

‘Where is yours?’

‘I’ve hidden it in the coat closet. And yours?’

I had hidden mine in the cellar.

‘Please go and get yours quickly,’ I said, ‘and then I’ll go and fetch mine.’

‘No, listen,’ said Juliette, ‘let’s both go and get them at the same time.’

‘And bring them into the drawing-room?’

'The bedroom if you don't mind, because it's nearer the closet and my surprise is awfully heavy.'

Mine weighed at least a ton and with all its wrappings only just got through the doors, but a normal well-built young man like me can carry such a weight up two flights of stairs easily. After all I had years in which to recover my breath.

'Heavens!' cried Juliette. 'What can it be? Another frigidaire?'

'You'll see, you'll see . . .'

'Right,' said Juliette. 'Now turn your back. I'm going to unpack mine.'

We unpacked back to back. Juliette counted one, two, three, and we turned round and . . . gave each other a television set. Our double surprise quadrupled our astonishment.

'If you only knew how silly you can look!' said Juliette roaring with laughter.

'I was just going to say the same thing,' I replied. But my laughter was feeble. 'It's really profoundly sad,' I continued. 'Just another edition of the scarf story.'

'Not at all!'

'Absolutely . . . When you wanted a scarf you gave it to me, as you may remember. I gave you a television set because I knew you wanted one. But you gave one to me because you also knew you wanted one.'

'Now that,' said Juliette, 'is where you are making a big mistake. I don't want one in the least.'

Upon which we turned our backs again and each studied the surprise that had been so much more surprising than we had expected. I could feel rage boiling up inside me and suddenly it exploded.

'Perfect!' I yelled. 'It gets better and better! Two sets and neither of us wants one!'

'You have a talent for spoiling everything,' said Juliette,



‘I don’t want one...’

taking advantage of the interruption to leave hers and come and examine mine. I grandly turned my back on her, although by doing so I landed up facing the other set. They were strangely similar.

We could, of course have spent the whole of our first wedding anniversary back to back, but one gets bored looking at a television set when it isn't working even quicker than when it is. Juliette got us out of the impasse with one of those *mots* of hers which make her unique.

'You know,' she said at last, 'mine was a bargain.'

Doubtless there exist particularly stalwart husbands who can find the strength to go on arguing even on their diamond wedding day. But Juliette's bargain sealed my mouth.

'I said it was for you,' she continued, 'so they gave me a thirty per cent reduction. On 70,000 francs I made 20,000.'

I steered for the bed with the utmost calm, stretched myself full length upon it and lit a cigarette.

'With me,' I said, 'things were different. Mine was also 70,000 but I got it for 50,000.'

'Then,' said Juliette, 'with the 20,000 I made it will only have cost you 30,000 francs!'

I threw her a dark look and disdained to reply.

'Oh very well,' sighed Juliette. 'You always have to be right, don't you? I'll take my set back. But you must admit it's silly to lose 20,000 francs.'

* * *

So we only kept one television set. It was enthralling. A bit too much so. But it also had its uses.

You invite people in to meet each other. You don't know what to talk to them about, so you play bridge or canasta. If we had been bridge or canasta players television would have taken the place of cards. But we were merely talkers – which, incidentally, is why we hardly ever asked anybody in. Thanks

to this machine we should be able to show some overdue civilities to our friends.

We established our guests on the sofas, and when they had finished looking at the magic lantern they went away without having had the smallest chance to tell us about the cost of living, their salaries, existentialism or the red and yellow perils. When we were alone the television produced exactly the same result. It functioned during luncheon and after nine at night, so that although I could dine quietly, in the middle of the day we were invaded by a succession of people who popped their heads into our little window, without even saying good morning, and explained to us the reason for their immense self-satisfaction. I ask myself why I looked at or listened to them. In any case there was no more question of our speaking a word to each other. Perhaps one could find a host of husbands who would be charmed to have their wives reduced to silence. But not me. Every day we missed golden opportunities for tearing out each other's hair.

It is true, though, that this invention offered other, entirely new, opportunities for discussion. On the subject of programmes, for instance.

Juliette adores crime. In *le Figaro* she only reads the bits about birth, love and death, the three topics which most interest her. If she read that a farm hand had raped a sixty-year-old farmer's wife before finishing her off with a meat chopper she pranced with indignation.

'What are they playing at, in this television business? That's the sort of thing they ought to show us!'

I had difficulty in getting her to admit that a civil servant who, until further notice, was not a criminal, could not very well subscribe to her programme: 'Tuesday at 12.45. The burning down of the Galeries Lafayette.' It wasn't that she was stupid, far from it. Only, when she wanted something, every obstacle seemed not only inadmissible, but a down-right insult.

The announcer also annoyed her prodigiously.

'I know she's not *really* in the room . . .' said Juliette.

'And you know just as well that I've never met her.'

'You meet her several times a day. It's she who has never met you, and I can't help thinking, in the circumstances, that it's pretty good cheek the way she worms her way in here to make eyes at you.'

That was true. She had a way of saying 'Good evening, Monsieur,' which was impudence itself. She gave you the feeling that you, personally, were tickling her. However, I didn't find this displeasing. Juliette evidently did. There are certain disadvantages in two people of different sexes living together.

For my part I was horror-stricken enough by the wrestling matches. We were entitled to several a week.

'Sham,' I told Juliette, 'pure sham. Else they would have been permanently crippled ages ago.'

'Look at the face he's making!' replied Juliette ecstatically.

The champion on the ground was writhing like a worm, even though the other champion was only sitting on his stomach absorbed in the contemplation of a foot he was grasping. No doubt he was meditating how best to dislocate it. One could not be certain who the foot belonged to.

'Look how he's suffering!' cried a radiant Juliette.

One evening a champion was left with only his opponent's shoe in his hand, the which he continued to knead furiously for several seconds. The scenario had evidently made no provision for weak shoe laces, and the other man continued to make agonized grimaces as though his toes were still in the shoe. Happily the referee had enough presence of mind for three. He retrieved the position by a sharp kick in the ribs. That certainly wasn't sham as was proved by the champion picking him up and throwing him at the audience. The performance would have had an additional *cachet* of authenticity

if there had been some more champions sitting in the front row. Alas, they were mostly women.

But if you want something really upsetting – upsetting to conjugal habits I mean – there is nothing like a television film.

* * *

A film, let me remind you, lasts an hour and a half, sometimes two hours.

‘When I think,’ said Juliette, ‘that at 9.15 I’m going to sit here quietly in my dressing-gown and see a film – it’s magical, isn’t it?’

I replied: ‘Yes. But to sit in a dressing-gown and not see a film might also be rather nice.’

And every day I realized with increasing clarity that men and women were not created to live together before the same television screen. I could have taken refuge in my attics. But the evenings, these first April days, were cool and I had turned off the central heating. Turning it on again would have been a simple solution, and I wonder if I can make you understand that its very simplicity made it impossible. I dug myself in in the ground floor sitting-room assuring Juliette that it was only the fire, dancing in the grate, which kept me there. What, in fact, kept me there, was the virus ‘Juliette’.

‘You’ve only got to go,’ she said.

‘I’m going,’ I replied.

And I stayed. Like a drug addict I craved my weekly dose of quarrels. After all you never feel so close to someone, do you, as when you’re longing to send them to the devil? Absurd of course. But without this absurdity divorces would be far more frequent.

‘Tonight,’ I said, ‘you needn’t think you’re going to make me look at that animated tripe of yours. After the news, we’re turning the thing off.’

You see, at nine o’clock we have the television news.

Because they never show people being hung it bores Juliette (except for the wrestling bouts of course). But I can't be torn away from it. It's silly, I dare say, but I like to see, that evening, the favourite somersaulting into the river at Auteuil that afternoon; and when President Auriol lays a bunch of flowers on my pedestal table I am charmed. So at nine I turned out the light, and we argued, as usual. At a quarter past nine I turned the light on again. She protested.

'When the news amuses you I'm not allowed to open my mouth. But if I have the misfortune to need a little distraction . . .'

I explained that it was indeed a misfortune, because the advertised film was notoriously bad. Everybody knew that. She didn't want to be convinced. I produced another argument . . . what about all my poor bruised hearts waiting for their psychic consolation, and that article which had to be in by tomorrow? Briefly: 'You know I have some work to do.'

'All the more reason for me to have some occupation while you're doing it,' she answered.

We had compromised with one little lamp.

'Oh well,' she sighed, 'if you have to work. But it bothers me.'

And of course I couldn't work with all these characters dropping in to give us their life histories.

I pushed my papers aside.

'You would do much better,' I told her, 'if you re-read the classics.'

She jumped up as if I had bitten her.

'What have I done to you that you're so mean?' she cried. But she soon returned to her screen, adding: 'You're really not at all nice this evening.'

I paced the room in the half light, my hands behind my back (except when I rubbed a shin).

'Forgive me for disturbing you,' I murmured, 'but is there any arnica in the house?'

'My God, but how tiresome you can be when you try!' said Juliette. 'One would think you did it on purpose . . . Rub!'

Having rubbed I couldn't think what on earth to do next. Read the classics, me too? While these hams ranted in the corner of the room? No, I couldn't manage it. On the other hand there was a huge pile of new books waiting for me to dip into them so that I could eventually incorporate their delights in a broadcast. I opened one, drew up an armchair near to the little lamp . . . but I hadn't turned a page before Juliette said:

'Do you think he's going to kill her?'

I answered with a short but vulgar word and picked up the book again. And then, automatically, I glanced at the screen. I could see she had got it badly adjusted. If anything of that sort is wrong I can't help it, but I just have to put it right. I reached for the knobs. At once she vibrated like a gong with rage.

'Don't touch it, don't touch anything! There now, you've shrunk Michèle Morgan!'

'But I haven't touched anything yet!'

'Michèle Morgan was much bigger!'

'But I tell you I haven't touched anything yet!'

'And I tell you she was bigger! And now, look, you've cut off her head! Ooooh!'

Tyrant, ever solicitous, was trying to calm me down by frenziedly worrying a trouser leg. I fiddled nervously with the knobs. Michèle Morgan began to look as though she were reflected in a contorting mirror at a fair. To a torrent of insults I struggled to give the star back her beauty.

I was right: the film was rotten. But there seems to be an evil spell in all films, potent as a desire to sleep, which disarms

one and makes one content to sink into the degrading state of a watcher. I sat down, my feet on a pile of books. I was caught now. I wanted to look. Then she, with the intention of making peace, came and sat on my knee. She lay in my arms, her cheek against mine, and her lovely hair uncoiled itself and hid the screen from my eyes.

* * *

I had my revenge. Since these intruders dared to come into my house to poison my evenings there was only one solution: counter-attack. In darkest secrecy I went and offered my services to the television director. He accepted them with joy. In case this astonishes you let me say that television, in its infancy, will try anything once.

And so one evening, when I had left Juliette sitting alone in front of her screen, she saw appear before her a man she knew well firmly clasping a ravishing creature to his bosom.

'May I present Juliette to you,' I said. 'Consider her as my wife. We are going to give you a little sketch called "At Grips with Television" or "Peace in the Home", whichever you prefer. If you are the owner of a television you will see how true to life it is . . . and of course, if you don't own a television you won't see anything at all. But please understand I have to be a bit discreet because my real wife is probably looking in on me. She spends her entire life in front of the screen.'

Then I strung together the outrages I suffered at home. The bogus Juliette was superbly odious. My joy would have been perfect had I been able to see the real Juliette's face, but I had a pretty shrewd idea of what it was looking like when we reached the final scene and the beautiful girl was on my knee, nuzzling me. As the public likes stories with happy endings I thought it my duty to display a tenderness far beyond my usual practice.

I reached home feeling nothing if not smug, counting on

finding an infuriated Juliette. She has never quite succeeded in making me believe she thought it all a wonderful joke. Perhaps not in very good taste, she declared, but funny, really funny. And really well acted. And that girl, she was really witty. And I was very telegenic, really I was. Only she had been disagreeably surprised, really she had, to see me kissing that girl in close-up.

‘Really?’ I said.

‘Yes,’ said Juliette. ‘I never realized before what an ass you looked when you kissed a woman. And . . . well . . . that annoyed me.’

* * *

I continued to produce television programmes. What with them, my broadcasts, my articles for the papers and my psychic consultations I hardly ever stopped working, and Juliette saw me less and less, except on the television. She exchanged our set for another more up-to-date one which, by some optical illusion, projected the picture on to a wall or a ceiling. She chose our bedroom ceiling, just above the bed. That is why, on the nights when I wasn’t on the ceiling myself I took to sleeping in ear plugs and dark glasses.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Wishing You Every Joy

IN Paris, in the spring, living is a joy. There must be a song which says that. The gardens wake up, the leaves are a tender green, the women's dresses light as the Paris air. Lovers hold hands and old men on park benches remember their old romances. Possibly. But I worked like a black without knowing any longer why I did it. I could not even find time to scold Juliette. Feeling more abandoned than ever, she scolded me.

For Juliette the days ran that peaceful and dangerous course which so often leads a woman, between five and seven in the evening, into a bar or a lover's arms. But Juliette wanted none of that. Lacking the invigorating storms of our honeymoon she simply slept; and nothing could be worse. Only the year before, in the springtime of our marriage, she had been reviving dying ducks, driving bachelors insane and giving her husband the jaundice . . . that was living, that was!

'Yes,' I said, 'and I was weighed down with debts.'

'And now?' said Juliette. 'Money doesn't bring happiness, as everyone knows.'

'Yes, yes. And also "Money is a plague which kills no one." All the same it's a plague.'

'The plague,' sighed Juliette, 'is to be alone when there are two of you.'

'Don't be childish,' I told her.

And I said to myself: she's right. But how could I behave differently? I had suffered too much from a lack of money

and now money had become an obsession with me. 'I want to have a lot of it so that I need never think of it again,' I said to myself. And I thought of nothing else. Not for me, of course – for her, to keep her in the heights. This was how I justified my slide into the depths.

* * *

Juliette watched me with an anxiety so well disguised that I noticed nothing. We were due to leave Paris directly after the fourteenth of July. We didn't want to miss the dancing in the streets.

'At Cap Camarat we could rent a shanty and be there all alone. Would you like that, darling?'

The idea was like a cool hand on the forehead of a feverish man. Calvi . . . she and me . . . I could always try and recapture it. Juliette naked by the sea again . . . yes, yes, it would be lovely to look at. But afterwards? I think I felt something close to panic. Forgive me for laughing, but two bodies and one hearth is the psychological adviser's favourite counsel, the picture he paints for all his clients. And look at us! 'Sir, I have tried to travel through life in a comfortable train running on straight lines, but the engine driver is a terrible woman who calls herself Juliette. What is more the train has turned out to be a goods train. I know I ought to jump off, but it goes faster and faster and I am afraid.' *Poor human flower.*

And so – no Calvi! We tore off, instead, to wherever the world shone brightest. Quickly, very quickly, as if I were hurrying to get it over. The impressions of this strange holiday are framed in the door of a railway carriage, or more precisely in the door of a second-hand Citroën.

Cannes. White dinner jackets, jewelled hands on the green tables of the Private Room where Hollywood producers amused themselves. The oval counters tossed across like centimes – they are only worth a hundred thousand francs – and

a Hollywood tycoon says to his neighbour: 'Lend me two million . . . lend me another . . . that makes seven, no eight I think?' And he shakes with laughter. A swarthy young man plays silently, attentive and cold. He is secretary to Senor Alberto Dodero, the king of the Argentine, and he is playing for his master.

Juan-les-Pins. As on all other evenings Thomas makes his clients dance to his tune. As the young women go by he smacks their bottoms and they squeal with pleasure.

Monte Carlo. It is siesta time. In the garden of our hotel, on a chaise longue, a lady looking like a Baroness sleeps, her mouth open and a newspaper on her head.

Eden-Roc. It looks as though the pages of a coloured picture magazine have been blown into the crevices of the rocks: Merle Oberon, Lily Pons, Lana Turner and other modern myths.

'Are they real? Do they speak?' asks Juliette.

So she gets up and she walks the length of the swimming pool, her nose in the air. I see she is going to stumble over Clark Gable's legs, and she does so, very neatly. I see she says something and the myth speaks back. She returns.

'He could speak,' said Juliette.

'What did you say to him?'

'Guess.'

'Right. Well, what did he answer?'

'It doesn't matter.'

'What?'

'He said: "It doesn't matter."'

'Very thrilling.'

'It ought,' says Juliette, 'to have been a big moment in my life, don't you think?'

At Nice, on the Promenade which looks like the Champs-Élysées at the week-end, the Sunday strollers flaunt their idleness in front of the fine rococo hotels, as once did the

Tsar's entourage, and that of Edward VII. In a hotel garden three musicians in frogged blue jackets – piano, violin and violincello – play a Viennese waltz, in their memory.

'Don't you think,' says Tamara yawning, 'that life is overpoweringly humdrum?'

On the St Tropez quay a décolleté Tamara is having a drink at Sennequier's, like everyone else.

'My darling boy isn't ill today? No jaundice, no surges of the soul? All the same he looks stricken. Come and sit down. No? Ah! How difficult it is to find a truly caddish man. What a blank in life, what a frightful blank! Tell me, are you conscious of eternity? Are you aware of time? Yes? No?'

That same evening I didn't behave myself very well in a quayside restaurant at St Maxime. I stared at the electric lights in the lapping water and said to myself: You've a cylinder missing somewhere, my boy. You've been had for a mug. And Juliette? Was it possible she was really happy among all these gold-plated dolls? Counters ran through their fingers on to the green tables like sand through the hands of children; worthless, like us in the hands of time.

The restaurant had dimmed its lights and only distant reflections bobbed on the sea. Juliette was silent and I just sat and brooded. Then she nudged my elbow and said in an uncertain voice: 'My darling, I don't think you can have noticed, but this must be what they call "a night made for love".'

I got up suddenly.

'Let's clear out, for God's sake!'

It was a good night for driving, but I drove badly.

'Darling,' remonstrated Juliette, gently, 'it would be a pity to kill ourselves.'

'Do you think so?' I asked. I really needed to know.

'I think,' said Juliette, 'that for some time now you have forgotten to love me.'

That was all for that evening.

On a sort of rocky spur which rose sheer from the sea a small circus was striking camp in the moonlight. We stopped and talked to them. There were nine brothers, six sisters and four horses not counting a month-old foal which had a frolic with Juliette. I told myself these people were happy. And then I told myself I was exaggerating.

* * *

When we had had enough of the glitter we returned to Paris and I resumed my occupation of running desperately round after my own tail. 'I run to my destruction,' a philosopher once said. 'Wheresoever I stop, there will I be destroyed.'

The situation was absolutely pathetic and I believe I took great pleasure in it. There was something grandiose, Promethean about it which tickled my sense of self-importance. Juliette tried to cure me by being funny.

'Dear distant soul,' she said, 'dear fantastic, modest and muscular soul, will you correspond with me in my loneliness?'

'Don't you think I have enough of this with my battered old clients?' I replied. 'Answer me. Don't you?'

'I do. So why behave like them?'

'Why don't you call me "Sensitive Plant", while you're about it?'

'Sensitive Plant,' resumed Juliette, 'are you, though still passionate, becoming prematurely faded?'

But I did not feel like laughing, and one evening I got so far as to try and tell her why.

'I know,' she said seriously, 'I know why you're driving yourself like this. I know much better than you. It isn't to make money. It is so as not to look at yourself, so as not to look at me.'

I should have said she was mistaken. I could not find the courage to deny it.

Some time after that, while we were dining in silence – we had become very silent – she dropped a pottery knife rest made by a rival of Picasso's which we had brought back from Antibes. It depicted a being of indeterminate sex with two faces and four eyes at the four points of the compass. I stared in silence at the pieces on the carpet and then I stared at Juliette.

'You can't stand me any more, can you?' she said.

I forgot to answer.

She got up.

'I'm going,' she said.

I shrugged my shoulders.

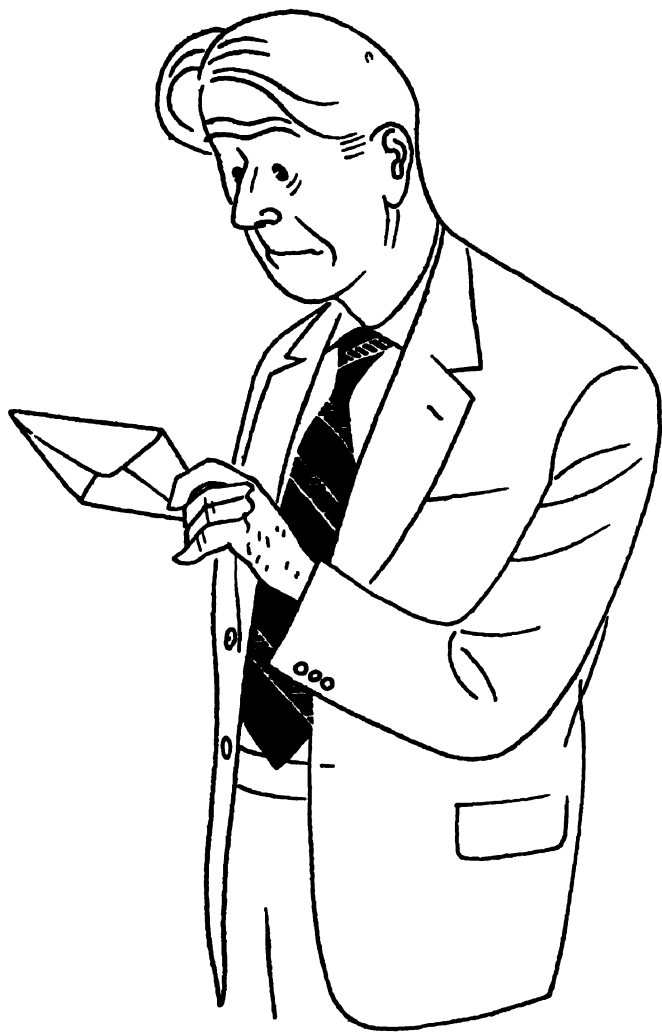
The clanging of the front door behind her fell like a cold hand on my chest. I stayed dead still for a long time trying to work out what had happened. Then I felt a sudden and urgent need to go and look at the front door.

'It must be a joke,' I said to myself. 'She wants to frighten me.'

On the hall table there was a letter. This gave me another icy spasm in the chest. I went into the kitchen and put my head under the tap. I sat down. It was Emilienne's night off. The letter was dated ten days before. Ten days ago she had written me this letter and during ten days she had carried it, waiting for some pretext . . . no, waiting to summon courage enough . . . or did she no longer need courage? I read it.

'I love you, but I no longer have the strength to fight, every second, for our happiness. If you had only known what I had to give you . . . and what you have done to it! I am leaving to find out if the desire to kill myself or the desire to return to you is the stronger . . .'

All the time I was reading I thought: healer of Lonely Hearts! They have had their revenge. 'For better or for worse,' had said Juliette. So had I. 'We shall always understand one another.' Of course. And then one writes articles,



There was a letter

sells psychology and never notices how much one needs it oneself. Whose fault? A woman expects you to be passionate and yet even-tempered, sensitive and yet virile, emotional and yet cool-headed. She wants a daily-breader but he must give her the trimmings of life as well, the small attentions as well as the big sensations. Gentleness pleases her, but anger has its merits. Your clumsiness annoys her if it doesn't arouse her pity. The same goes for your subtlety. Never caress her when she wants to be bitten. There is a time for everything. But when is it? Damn it all, you don't want her to have to tell you!

A man expects almost the same virtues in a woman, although generally not at the same moment.

'Healer of Lonely Hearts . . .'

Suddenly I hurled myself out of the kitchen, opened the front door in flight, jumped into the car and drove to the quay nearest the house. In Paris the most popular spots for suicides are the Métro and the Seine, with the Eiffel Tower for very grand occasions. I was sure Juliette had chosen those black waters in which to engulf her dreams. (Gas is popular too, of course, but I wasn't anxious about this, having just come from the kitchen.)

How long the quays are! Especially when one is running. Longer still when one is running after a wife bent on suicide. And a human being isn't very big even when one loves it. It is even smaller at night. This thought, coupled with my breathlessness, persuaded me at last to sit down. I took up a position on the edge of the quay near a bridge, legs dangling and eyes scanning the waters.

I kept asking myself this question, without finding the answer: does a drowned body float or doesn't it? If it is full of air? Or gas? . . . no, air? Her hair would be straight, pulling her head back so that she stared at the sky, at the moon, or dragging her down under the dirty waters of the Seine?

I will give you a child. Several. Twins. If there was a child we would not argue for nothing. If you are not drowned . . . I get up, trembling and crying with pity for her, and for me . . . I hold myself back a moment longer before diving . . . I must still be on the look out for her . . . I must keep my eyes open . . . I must look, look, look. And the longer I stay leaning over the silent waters the more do my nerves scream for action. And nothing floats by. Ah! Move or I shall scream!

I hear a splash which makes me jump. A moment later and I have dived into the Seine. I cry 'Juliette, Juliette, I love you!' as I swim around drinking river water. This lasts as long as I can swim or drink. People are moving on the bank but I don't want to see them. And then, having cried my love too loud I drink a drop too much, choke, and wake up on the tiled floor of our kitchen.

'The gas,' I murmured. 'She chose gas!'

'Can you still smell it?' asked an unknown voice. It was a policeman.

'Is she dead?' I asked.

'Did you imagine,' said Juliette's voice, 'that I would die for *you*?'

I opened my eyes wide.

' . . . Die for a man who goes haring about the streets leaving a casserole of noodles cooking?'

'It was spaghetti,' I said, slightly dazed.

'Noodles!' repeated Juliette. 'Which have boiled over and put out the gas.'

'Noodles?' I echoed. 'Ah . . . good . . . I thought it was . . .'

'Well, well,' interrupted the policeman cheerfully, 'seems you're very much better. But the next time you want to commit suicide don't bellow so loud.'

'What!' I yelled. 'It was she who was committing suicide!'

The policeman turned to Juliette. 'If you would like us to take him away, till he's calmed down a bit . . . ?'

I wish I could be sure she didn't hesitate. I am not sure.

'It's not worth it,' she said at last. 'I think I shall be able to control him. He's not violent, you know.' She added, while drying my hair: 'He's a very calm and orderly man.'

'I see,' said the policeman. 'Well, good night then.'

I was sitting in the middle of the kitchen. 'It feels to me,' I murmured, 'as if I were more than usually wet . . . dripping, in fact.'

The floor was covered with a sheet of water in which Juliette splashed like a duck.

'You're dripping, all right,' she said lightly. 'But this water happens to come from the tap which you forgot to turn off. It stretches as far as the dining-room.'

In a trice I was on my feet, making a lovely waterfall.

'But then,' I stammered, 'the parquet . . .'

'A swimming bath,' said Juliette gaily, rolling up the bottoms of my trousers. 'The only time I leave you alone! A fine mess! Instead of taking the opportunity to enjoy the quiet . . .'

'The quiet!' I barked. 'When you had gone off to . . .'

'Taratata,' said Juliette. 'I insist that you had a wonderful unlooked for opportunity to spend a peaceful evening . . .'

' . . . A peaceful evening . . . ?'

' . . . A peaceful evening. And instead of that, what do you do? You make off like a haunted lunatic, leaving the door wide open, water pouring everywhere, the gas on . . .'

I held my dripping arms out to her. She dodged them with a hop. They dropped to my sides again, going 'floc'.

'I see,' I muttered, 'you don't love me any more.'

'Oh I love you very much, but you're soaking wet. Take off your coat and wring it out.'

'Over the sink?' I stammered.

'Over the drawing-room,' said Juliette.

'And you?' I asked solicitously, 'aren't you wet?'

'Me?' said Juliette. 'Barely. Just from looking after you.'

I laughed bitterly. 'While I was *diving* after you.

'Don't let's exaggerate,' said Juliette. 'It was only after a big paving stone.'

'A big paving stone?'

'Yes,' said Juliette, 'a paving stone, well, a big stone then! Like this . . . splash!'

I felt an urgent need to sit down on the floor again. The flood had appreciably abated.

'Would it trouble you too much,' I asked in a weak voice, 'to explain things from the very beginning?'

'It's very simple. I hadn't absolutely decided whether I would kill myself or not. Got that? Good. And besides, the water was icy. I sat down under the Grenelle bridge to think it over. Then I saw you cantering by. It cheered me up a lot. Then you sat down and you started looking at the water, and you never stopped looking at the water – as though you could see me in it. That got on my nerves. So then I took a big stone and threw it in.'

'Why did you do that?' I muttered.

'Oh, I don't know,' said Juliette.

Perhaps I could have found something apposite to say if I hadn't been shaken by a fearful sneeze. It made circles in the watery floor at my feet, luminous circles like the haloes which martyrs wear on their heads.

I sneezed again before getting up. 'I've an idea,' I said.

'So what?' she said.

I took her in my arms without waiting for her opinion. I was pleased to see that from a lock of my hair the Seine fell, drip by drip, on to her nose.

'I've an idea,' I repeated.

'Buck up with it then,' said Juliette shivering.

'I've been thinking. Suppose we two decided to be happy?'

'Goo . . . goo . . . good idea,' said Juliette sneezing.